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## Commemorating the Bhadrakok: Exploring Culture as Governance in the Context of West Bengal

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**Abstract:** *The 34 year Leftist rule (1977-2011) is a long standing proof that Leftism and Bengal have a long history. Through the creation of cultural icons that are incapable to pose a threat to the existential identity of the regime itself, the Left Front constructed a strong ideological paradigm synchronic to the immediate goal of its governance. With the hegemony of the bhadrakok identity as a signifier of cultural capital, the battle of identity and consequently governance becomes easy. It is in this domain of cultural governance that I wish to look at the role of events like the Kolkata Book Fair that has come to form a major part of the cultural landscape of present day West Bengal. In the course of my paper I would like to trace the origin of the Bengali intelligentsia and demonstrate how symbols of knowledge/power, notions of progression, and liberation have been linked to literacy.*

**Keywords:** *city, governance, history, Kolkata, Left front, media archive, politics*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sculpted in colonial hands, Calcutta has had a very small history, in comparison to cities like Delhi and Hyderabad. In the absence of historical signposts, events such as the Durga Puja, the Natya Utsav, and the Boi Mela then assume a significant space in the urban landscape, one that performs the act of rooting its identity. In such a scenario, I plan to focus on *The Kolkata Antorjatik Boi Mela* for it has come to occupy a significant place in the cultural landscape of the city. Celebrated in theatre, literature, songs and limericks of Calcutta, it is the world's third largest annual conglomeration of books after the Frankfurt Book Fair and the London Book Fair. With a successful run of thirty five years the event acquires the importance of an annual pilgrimage in the psyche of the Bengali. In 2008, when the Calcutta High Court withdrew the permission to hold the book fair at *Maidan* environmental grounds, the government and the people came out together resenting the court's decision. The chief minister was no less sarcastic. "I have no idea how books can cause pollution. We have to find a way out. It is as if a war has been waged against books," he said (IANS).

The Mela is can then be seen as a significant political project that has assisted in the dominance of a section of people (the 'inheritors and upholders Bengali intelligentsia') in West Bengal to appropriate their sense of cultural identity on its subjects by hegemonic practices through the symbol of the book. I would like to contextualize this within the specificity of the space of the Boi Mela where the relation between the social and the individual is aestheticized and commoditized into a cultural capital. I would also like to read how the consumption of certain places such as these generates within the subject a paradigm of social cultural distinctions which in turn determines whether he is 'cultured' or not, or how 'cultured' he is.

### 2. CONTEXT

In his book, *The Present History of West Bengal*, Partha Chatterjee refers to a significant occasion in the history of West Bengal politics, which I presume is significant here, for it charts out the present notion ascribed to 'cultural heritage' in Calcutta. Being the centenary year of the Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath*, Congress leader Subrata Mukherjee demanded the book's wide circulation among the public. Controversy arose when *Anandamath*<sup>1</sup> was thought to be a risk in drawing "the attention of the government to notions of the 'secular' ... (and therefore) to the possible repercussions on communal harmony in the state and the necessity of balancing 'the national heritage' with the 'political reality'." (Chatterjee, *Present History of West Bengal* p.2). The significance of the

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<sup>1</sup>*Anandamath* faced controversy due to its so called non-secular nature for it clearly speaks against Muslim rulers and is projects nationalists as primarily Hindu.

uproar, Chatterjee points is not in “its debate about culture but the extreme reluctance of the members of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly to enter the debate”. (Chatterjee, *Present History of West Bengal*, p.1). It is also significant to note how numerous things come to be encapsulated within the domain of ‘cultural heritage’. First, the dimension that the book seems to contain some sort of commemorative value that can send ripples of communal discontent. Second, how a category of Bengali intelligentsia seems to be synonymous with the cultural identity of the West Bengal.

In the course of this section, I will try to argue how this act of symbolizing the cultural identity of the ‘Bengali’ through the commodity of the book, may be the result of a gradual process of abstraction of a memory of a certain tradition of the Bengali intelligentsia. And through the same process how the tradition of the Bengali intelligentsia (which later seems to slip into the category of the Left) has come to be synonymous with the cultural heritage of the place. Further, the process through both the above configurations happen, in my opinion is through the act of commemoration. By commemoration, I mean, the process “to place objects in history and, with time, to replace history.”(Richards, p.60) What I mean here by replacing history is the appropriation of the past in the context of the present, for it is when “pasts become meaningful and usable only then they are activated by the contemporary desires of individuals and communities, and, most powerfully, by the will of nations.” (Thakurata, p.ii.) This mapping is relevant, in my opinion, for it will provide a framework against which the authorization and upholding of a certain culture over other spheres as decorum becomes necessitated.

With the origin of the city in foreign hands, the *baniyas* and *dewans* picked up bits and pieces of the foreign tongue, to become intermediaries between the British traders and the rural artisans, thus consequently rising to influential positions by the end of the nineteenth century. ‘English’ was considered the gift of the West, which opened to the natives the gates to a world of science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, and modern methods of state craft, in short the gifts of Western modernity.<sup>2</sup>

With the formation of the Asiatic Society, people like Ram Mohan Roy, David Hare, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and William Carey gathered up to set modern schools and colleges in the city. The Fort William College was established in 1800. The Hindu College was established in 1817. Unlike any other city in South Asia, there was a steady growth in the number of students who enrolled for a degree. (McGurie, p.45) Free schools were set up in the city to teach English. Consequently, a class of people emerged who were products of the English colonial education system. They conformed to what Macaulay in his famous Minutes of 1835 said, “... a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Raley).

By early nineteenth century, we find things taking a turn. One of the first instances of nationalism is heard in the voice of Tarachand Chakrabarti in his opposition of D.L.Richardson. When the latter attacked meeting of the Derozians as an act of ingratitude to the empire that had gifted them knowledge, Tarachand said: “We have obtained the use of this public hall by leave applied for and received from the Committee, and not through the your personal favor” (Chatterjee, p. 205) This separation of ‘knowledge’ from the domain of the colonizers is very significant. The following years record a steady growth in ‘national’ societies in the pursuit of knowledge.

A crucial factor that leads to the growth of the nationalist voice in the society is the coming of the print medium. With the coming of the print one notices many changes in society. First, with the production of the ‘book’, there emerged a business around the selling of the commodity. The book was now available to the common man. It no longer lay in the domain of the western colonial education. Consequently, there emerged a class of people who formed their identity in association to this habit of reading, collecting, writing and publishing books. Moreover, with the emergence of native newspapers, the nationalists could now spread their voice and their opinion to the masses with much ease. Western education or Western modernity could now be criticized. The voice of such newspapers

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<sup>2</sup> Chatterjee opines, how modernity in India came with colonization and thus:

“We have never quite been able to that there exists a universal domain free of discourse unfettered by differences of race or nationality. Somehow from the very beginning we have made a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledges and modern regimes of power we would forever remain the consumers of universal modernities; never would be taken seriously as its producers”.( Chatterjee, *Present History of West Bengal*. p.204.)

was identified as the voice of the people. The colonized could now have their opinion on matters happening outside the country. In 1836, the National library was set up to cater to the growing reading habits of the people. It was a non-governmental institution and was run on a proprietary basis. Another significant space of consumption that emerged is College Street which soon came to be the centre of the world for Calcutta.

The commodity of the book now came to acquire a powerful dimension. Not only did it democratize the domain of knowledge within the masses the printed alphabet had the power of authority. Unlike earlier times, religious practices could now be criticized easily for with print came authorship and referencing and thus an accountability to the printed word. The book thus not only enabled a decentralization and democratization of knowledge but also a certain authority. It was now the symbol of enlightenment, knowledge, power, tradition, rebellion, reformation etc. for Bengal. At the same time it should also be taken into notice that though the book was made available to all those who could reach it i.e. a section of the society namely the urban middle class with their economic wealth that could afford it. Thus, the habit of reading, the authority of the printed word, the power of intelligentsia remained only within their domain.

This new class i.e. the *bhadralok* apparently seemed very elusive. With a projection of intelligentsia or knowledge as a cultural commodity (one that apparently does not seem to be the wealth of any class but rather at the vicinity of every ideal Bengali's reach) formed in the psyche of every Bengali the elusive image of the *ideal*. The domain of 'knowledge consumption' either traditional (cultures) or material<sup>3</sup>(Chatterjee, *Nation and its Fragments*, p.128) (the English language) promises to its consumer, in this case the suburban or rural class, a transcendental mobility.<sup>4</sup> Disturbingly, "it did not matter, thus, if one had never read Tagore, did not know who Bankim Chandra was, or for that matter who were the other stalwarts of literature, in the world of music, or in art; but it was important to agree that they were all great, and therefore worthy of admiration. Similarly it did not matter if one's politics was casteist, communal, not liberal in any sense of the term, but it was important to agree that secularism was good, that democracy in the broadest sense was the goal."(Banerjee, p.248)

Historically, the tradition of the nationalist movement in Bengal did follow the same path of intellectual leadership. Chittaranjan Das, Subash Chandra Bose and many other prominent leaders became admirable by virtue of their intellect. Unlike, the Congress led nationalist mass movements in Northern India, the nature of anti-colonial struggle in Bengal was predominantly occupied by the urban middle class. (Chatterjee, *Present History of West Bengal*, p.22) Again, from the 1920's, we find the emergence of various organized working class movements in Calcutta and its adjacent areas. It readily established its connection with the Marxist ideology. The idea of Soviet socialism, facts and figures of working class movements in different parts of the world started to intervene into the hitherto nationalist paradigm of the Bengali intelligentsia. Interestingly, both on ideological and organizational planes, the Congress was unable to absorb the spirits of these new developments. Also, Tagore's account of Socialist Russia (*Letters from Russia*) had a great influence on the young Bengali intellectuals who later changed their political alignment from the old nationalist school to progressive Leftism. The 1930's threat of Fascism saw the socialists and bourgeoisie humanists join hands under the call for a United Front. In 1939, the Anti-Fascist Writers' Association was formed in India with the broad-based unity among the intellectuals. The Communist Party of India was always active but the need to reach a wider section of the people. This necessitated the formation of the IPTA. In its struggles against Imperialism and Fascism and, on the other, the year of the Bengal Famine (1943), it saw a "period of fertile cultural activity, rich in progressive content and earmarked by a distinct break from the traditional pattern, both in form and content. The stress on naturalism was by-passed and realistic works made their impact on the cultural scene."(Khan et al, p.5) This saw the reflection of the condition of the workers and peasants in literature, plays, paintings and films.

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<sup>3</sup> The material sphere was the sphere of the western civilization whose superior powers were necessary to be learnt/acquired and the spiritual was where the arena of the religious, the cultural that could not be compromised with.

<sup>4</sup>It was elusive for it was unlike a caste category, one that is closed since it's bound by birth, or a class category where mobility is through the economic forces determined by societal factors. Mobilization here is made to look very simple: through the individual's quest for knowledge consumption, which on the face of it, looks nothing unnatural for it is not the claim of the Bengali society but rather the modern world itself.

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The Partition of Bengal in 1947 was another big blow. Along with a sense of alienation from the north Indian political idiom and the subsequent famines and mishaps persuaded the *bhadralok* down the Left road, a growing sense of marginalization and urged him to be different. The partition of Bengal called upon the need of a specific identity that could no longer be fulfilled by the pan-Indian parties like the Indian National Congress and thus came to be contested in the eyes of the Bengali Intelligentsia. The rural folk on the other hand pestered less by the claims of cultural identity had no qualms in accepting it. Like in 1956, there came a proposal from the center to join Bihar and Bengal. Perceived as a threat to the Bengali identity, the Progressive Intellectuals, Left wing parties and organizations joined hands in protest of this (Chowdhury, p.341) Along with other movements similar to this, the Left ideology in the coming years, we see, came to be synonymous with the cultural identity of Bengal.

Thirty-four years ago, in 1977, the CPI (M) along with other Left allies took power over the West Bengal state government. A particular characteristic of the Left Front government in this period was to prioritize culture to a different dimension. This led to the need to govern this sector with a certain kind of ethics, morals and boundaries. It primarily acted on some exclusive and inclusive principles: for example, it poses certain cultural rules and prohibitions in public life. "The term *bhadralok* has always had a moral code of conduct associated with it. And somewhere along the way, caste/origin ceased to matter less,<sup>5</sup> and conduct, which was taken to be an attribute of achievement, became important." (Ghosh, p.248)

Again, with the hegemonization of the *bhadralok* identity as a signifier of cultural capital, the effect was two-fold. First, the consequent categorizing of other forms of culture as secondary or tertiary and thus, the second point, the upholding of this as the primary domain of culture which then becomes the upholder of the Bengali identity. This is different from repressive apparatuses, because from its beginning, the Left Front tried to make a consensus. The battle becomes easy now for it is played in the binaries of *bhadra/a-bhadra*. No matter what anyone did, since the Bengali intelligentsia now came to signify the proponents of culture anything that opposed them signified as non-cultural and thus non-Bengali. Moinak Biswas argued that 'the 32-year rule of the Left has been made possible through a stabilization of cultural norms, and through the ruling party's success in establishing itself as the legitimate representative of those norms. The curious mixing of socialist and Bengali nationalist elements in the CPI(M) language is a good index of this process, from which an exceptional bricolage of political techniques has emerged.' (Biswas, p.202) I argue, this gradual process is linked with the construction of a strong ideological-cultural paradigm synchronic to the immediate goal of the Left Front government of West Bengal. This is largely done through creation of cultural icons that are incapable to pose a threat to the existential identity of the governance itself. An instance of this is the representation of Rabindranath Tagore (once criticized strongly by Indian, even some Bengali Marxist intellectuals), Nazrul Islam and many more as the cultural and political supplement of the Left ideology itself. In this way, they were successful to create a dominant and superior paradigm of knowledge overarching the psychological strata of the governed. Thus, the norm gradually has become to signify that only the educated people have the right to rule and govern. Also, this education does not only mean the literacy, but certain sense of cultural heritage of Bengal and the Bengali community. Therefore, it is evident that, the non-elite non-or less educated people will naturally be subjugated to the intellectual (mostly English spoken) Bengali leaders (Though they were strong propagators of using mother language as the medium of instruction). Nevertheless, it has become an easier way to overcome the cultural battle: just to show the political opponents as 'culturally inferior' to them. In fact it has become as a potent political weapon, because the land of Bengal is showcased as the land of intellectual tradition, thus the question of dignity and heritage. It would be worthy to cite Biswas here again:

"A frequently asked question before the Lok Sabha elections was, "How could one accept Trinamool Congress as an alternative? The leadership of the Left is, after all, in the hands of the *bhadralok*; Trinamool is a party of unruly trouble mongers". A common answer from those who favor change was that the ruling Left today best represents violence, misrule and corruption." (Biswas, p.203)

Thus, the opponents, who are incompetent for this title, evidently cannot become the ideal representative of Bengali people. Though, these 'Bengali people' are nothing but a handful of urban middle class.

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<sup>5</sup> The following is an often-heard expression of wounded pride in our city – "We might be *garib* (poor), but we are still *bhadralok*."

### 3. THE BOOK FAIR

Anjan Ghosh in his study of public arenas talks of the “communitarian contesting of public domains since the end of the nineteenth century (which) created a space between the state and society that served as an arena of ritual acts and performances.”(Ghosh, A. p.291) He refers to Freitag who notes public arenas as “a world of ritual, theatre and symbol. It is a universe that sometimes reinforces hierarchy ... and at other times expresses conflict among unequals; it may even do both simultaneously. Most important, it is a world tied closely to the social and political contexts of its locale and hence accommodates and reflects change.”(Freitag, p.19.) In this aspect events not only occupy a significant place in the landscape of a place because it roots a particular identity but the very process through which this identity is formulated connotes a objectification/ subjectification process of which both the consumer citizen and the haloed community are only effects.

The scope of my paper here treats the *Kolkata Antorjatik Boi Mela (The Kolkata International Book Fair)* as a space of consumption not only because, it as a microcosm, bears the reflection of a cultural totality of a region but also, and perhaps more importantly the formation of these cultural identities cannot be and should not be thought outside the efficacious domain of commodity form. The attempt of trying to portray this has higher tones of the structure of power through which the dominance of a certain section of people over the rest becomes easy not by virtue of anything else but the domain of culture itself. Further, by the projection of a certain culture over other domains of life, governance is carried out through the decorum of this particular culture. The Mela is a tool that the state machinery uses not only to project a certain mode of culture as superior to the other, but the very spectacle of the event is used to discipline subjects into an agreement of this dominance. The event acquires the aura of a pilgrimage that has to be visited by all who come to get a massive phenomenal assault on their senses through the aura of the spectacle around. This ‘disciplining of reluctant consumers’ is ironically done not through the economic terms of price but rather a sense of subconscious societal decorum forced upon the mind.

A significant factor that led to the origin of the Boi Mela was the attempt of a group of publishers<sup>6</sup> who visited the Frankfurt Fair in England and envisaged the thought of creating a similar fair in Calcutta. (Chatterjee T, p. 4) However, this vision received a lot of criticism. The old generation resented this. They were accused of bringing the tradition of the city symbolized in the book to the ‘bazaar’. “Is the book a commodity, like the sandal, shoe, saree, soap that you will construct fair and shout: SALE. There is a different respect accompanied with the book. Will you push it to the bazaar?? Chi chi!!” (ibid.p.4) In response to this they replied: “We publish books to sell them. And so the bazaar is required. If the Boi Mela is formed, we do not understand how that would demean its prestige in any way.” (ibid, p. 4)

In the above confrontation we find two aspects clearly coming up. One, the act of selling the book becomes synonymous to the act of ‘selling the Bengali tradition’. Second, the domain of the market is linked to the West and thus seen to be an adulteration of the Bengali identity. What comes up here time and again is the image that the book has come to occupy in the psyche of the Bengali. It is no longer a commodity but the icon of tradition, one that gives the Bengali his sense of identity.

The success of the Kolkata Boi Mela has resulted in many book fairs in smaller cities in West Bengal like Siliguri. The early eighties witnessed the Left government create a network of government aided libraries in West Bengal. The existing libraries in the city, semi urban, semi-rural towns received financial grants and aid. The State Government’s Information and Cultural Affairs and the Department of Libraries opened libraries in every district, subdivision and even in blocks. Attempts were made to create reading habits within the inhabitants of each locality. A common slogan “*Bhuka manush dhoro boi, ota hatiar*” (‘O hungry man, empower yourself, pick up the book’) has come to be associated with the state’s project of intellectual empowerment. This can be said to legitimize the hierarchy of the educated elite Bengali middle class. Thus, we see that the apparent objective innocence of the event can no longer be taken at face value. It then acquires the dynamics of a higher political project. Though small in appearance, these events conduct into the space of everydayness cultural signifiers of knowledge, intelligentsia as habits that need to be acquired and accompanied within the sphere of the common man’s life. The success of these events in turn projects the Kolkata Boi Mela as a sacred site that has to be visited every year by a conscious Bengali.

<sup>6</sup> Bimal Dhar, Ashok Barik, Shuprokash Bose, Jayanta Bose, Arun and Jayanta Bagchi, Prabir Das Gupta, Amarchand Dey.

Over the years, we see, the Boi Mela has become a giant literary event. But time and again people have expressed their discontent in its workings. Siddhartha Pansari, the owner of the Crossword bookstores complains, "What was once a defining event in the publishing industry is slowly, steadily and sadly turning into a regional event because of our failure to evolve and a lack of vision to take this to the next level." The complaint we see is of the slow development of the Mela in the recent years. It has not changed with the changing consumer habits. Pansari notes, "Globalization has changed the world — and with it publishing and book-selling. Many modern bookstores have opened shops in Calcutta and are now heading towards the districts. So book lovers have ample browse-and-buy facilities 365 days a year. Internet retailing, e-commerce and online libraries deliver favorite books at the customer's doorstep." True to fact, we find this commentary to be ironic for contrary to the event having lost its grandeur due to other qualifiers of knowledge coming up, we see how the event has not lost its significant hold in the psyche of the Bengali. Meghna Nayak, another visitor, in her reaction to the fair calls the event, "a unique cultural phenomenon where the essentially intimate act of buying and reading a book is transformed into a 12-day party of eating biryani while listening to disco music and discussing the latest Arundhati Roy offering." She opines, for the book lover accustomed to the cozy confines of Oxford Bookstore and Starmark, or the glamour of the Jaipur Literary Festival, the humble Kolkata Boi Mela, with its endemic inefficiency and unreadable maps can be unpalatable. Thus the question arises that in a state with pitiable literacy levels, whether the event actually celebrates the book. "It's just social networking of a different kind," she adds. The event thus we see again occupies more than a place of books as a symbol of the literary sphere of Calcutta, one that is far removed from the material qualms of availability. What is important is the symbol that it represents to its people especially the ones outside the urban sphere for whom the availability of the book seldom matters. What is important is the dimension of the symbol that he has agreed to conform to.

Malini Bhattacharya talks of how 'Calcutta' has emerged as a cultural concept, a sign used in a quest for identity, through films, literature etc. Be it the musicians and visual artists, or the 'Patuas' of Birbhum and Midnapur, coming to settle down in Kalighat and adapting their style to the satirical portrayal of the 'sahibs', there are *jhumur* singers too flocking to Calcutta to find patronage and struggling to revise their art to suit urban tastes even as poverty and periodic famine stalked rural area. Calcutta has always been the focal point to the quest of cultural identity. The Boi Mela as a symbol also projects this dimension for the symbol of it signifying Calcutta as the image of Bengal is obvious. As the event emerges as a sacred site that one has to visit during the year the symbol of Calcutta as the identity of Bengal too is further hegemonised.

Literacy and intellectualism in general, have always played major role in the construction of the Bengali self-identity. This is quite evident if one looks at the tremendous cultural privilege attributed to the legendary College Street market in Calcutta. The Boi Mela then has come to represent not only an important part of the cultural landscape of Bengal but through an array of events, the very symbol of culture that Bengal must conform to. However, what the Boi Mela is able to do unlike the legendary College Street Market is accommodate a living tradition in the heart of the city. It is not only a signature of the culture of the city, but like the Durga Puja a festival that occurs once every year. As Meghna says it is a space of social networking where people are brought under the spectacle of the book and under its gaze they are made to realize one's own worth. Moreover, with the dimension of a festival, it can pull out the suburban and rural crowd into the Mela where one is made to realize the elusive dimension of the book.

It is true that there are other festivals, exhibitions and even ritual and the political sorts of events associated identity formation, but the reason the Boi Mela is different is due to the fact that other events that show relative autonomy vis-à-vis the market and also establish an 'auratic thing' which in turn becomes objective of consumerist desire. Events like the Annual International Film Festival, the Natya Utsav not only have generated due to other socio-political reasons but also fail to accumulate such a huge crowd like the Boi Mela. They seem to cater to different classes and thus the politics of their exhibition of culture is different.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The paper has demonstrated how a particular form of governance in Bengal has used the Boi Mela as a tool to project the commodity of knowledge as the cultural capital of the place. Further in doing so it has created a certain ethics of governance in which the tradition of Bengali intelligentsia is made synonymous to the cultural identity of

Bengal. Thus, there arises a necessity to obtain the obedience of the suburban and the rural folk. With the success of the Antorjatik Boi Mela as a cultural event, the Left government uses this form to extend the halo of this class through the symbol of the book to the peripheries of the city. With overtones of the tradition of knowledge and intelligentsia the Boi Mela through a process of commemoration has abstracted the tradition of the Bengali intelligentsia as the identity of the *ideal* Bengali. What is significant more than the event is how the Left Front has spread this form of abstraction to places in and around the city and achieved a dominance of the intelligentsia in the sphere of the everydayness in the lives of its subjects. This in turn creates a consensus of its process of governance through the creation of certain norms that apparently go hand in hand with the project of people's empowerment with knowledge. What is aimed at is not literacy at all but an agreement to its dominance.

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