

Lives Under the Shadow of Conflict
Late Colonial Surveillance and Aspects of Second World
War in Bengal

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This dissertation examines the impact of war-time surveillance on various social segments of late-colonial Bengal. In the process a variety of obscure individuals, and changing patterns of their social situations are explored, to portray blood-soaked footprints of a moribund regime at a microscopic level. How the process of late-colonial intelligence gathering unravelled and affected the lives of political suspects, refugees, drifters and military deserters constitute the focus of this research. The racial, gender and class dimensions of war-time emergency measures are revealed through the obscure lives that came under the radar of the colonial state.

With the outbreak of Second World War, the colonial regime had found itself in a precarious situation. Profound anti-colonial consciousness had touched almost every level of the subjugated society. In the political field Indian National Congress had lost its monopoly over mass movements, as socialists and communists made their presence felt through peasant movements and working class agitations. 1939 was a momentous year for India. Internal strife in INC had reached its zenith. In January firebrand nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose humbled Gandhi's nominee Sitaramayya in a close fight to capture the post of INC President for two consecutive terms. However he was forced to resign within months due to the non-cooperation from Congress top brass and was subsequently removed from INC in August. Subhas Chandra Bose formed Forward Bloc with an aim to wage militant anti-colonial struggle as opposed to the allegedly conciliatory approach taken by Congress leadership. In following years the rupture between Subhas and INC leadership would grow continually as he organised Indian National Army and made abortive attempts to dismantle the colonial edifice with the help of the Imperial Japanese Army. Apart from the internal strife, alienation from toiling masses i.e. workers and peasantry

were also plaguing Congress ministries in provinces.¹ On the other hand, the colonial regime perceived the declaration of the war in September 1939 as an opportunity to rescind limited reforms introduced in the inter-war period by conferring overwhelming coercive power on the central government. Viceroy Linlithgow ‘unilaterally associated India’ with Britain's war effort. In their bid to win back the popular support Congress ministries used the pretext to tender their resignation in October 1939.² To curtail the semblance of civil liberties a series of emergency laws were promulgated including the Defence of India Act. As the colonial bureaucracy strived to reclaim ‘the ground lost to the Congress from 1937 or earlier’ through outright repression, the rupture between the British Raj and Indian subjects was more visible than ever.³

With active support from the government, in the initial years of the war Bengal witnessed a marked increase in the entrepreneurial investment in jute, iron and steel, and mining industries.⁴ Japan's entry into Second World War in 1941 and its lightning advance up to the Eastern frontier, made Britain aware of the vulnerabilities faced by its prize colonial possession, India. Calcutta and its industrial suburbs, the hotbed of anti-colonial movements, now became central to the war effort in the Eastern Frontier. Although the government propaganda tried to mobilise the support for the Allied war effort, the fear of Japanese air-raids, rumours of an imminent attack on Bengal, spiralling prices, and stagnating wages made the war increasingly unpopular among the inhabitants of Bengal. To thwart the Japanese incursion a large number of foreign troops were deployed in different corners of Bengal. Their friction with the local populace coupled with the involvement of a section of soldiers in criminal activities of different shades magnified the anti-British hatred.

¹ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885-1947*, (New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd., 2004), p. 375.

² *Ibid.* p.375.

³ *Ibid.* p.376.

⁴ Srimanjari, *Through War and Famine: Bengal 1939-45*, (New Delhi, Orient Blackswan Private Limited, 2009), p.80.

As the safety and security of industries deemed 'essential' for the war effort were prioritised by the colonial state, the British authorities chose to strike a fine balance between the policy of outright repression and providing some measure of relief through 'war bonus' and 'Priority Classes Scheme' which ensured supply of food items to the workers at a subsidised rate. However Bengal peasantry and masses employed in informal sectors i.e. rickshaw-pullers, book-binders, laundrymen, cobblers were exposed to the vagaries of uncertain times. From the second half of 1941, as the hostilities with Japan spread to India's eastern frontier, rice import from Burma was stopped. In the meantime, the food situation in Gangetic delta deteriorated as the state initiated the policy of 'denial'. Stored paddies were confiscated and country boats were destroyed by the colonial government. The food crisis aggravated and turned into a full-blown famine which swept over the Bengal countryside in 1943-44 and 'affected an estimated 1.5 million to 3 million people'.⁵ Famine stricken people flocked to Calcutta, only to die a slow and painful death on its streets.

The anti-colonialism of the period was more profound in the social sense and overflowing Bengal jails proved that incarcerating every activist was virtually impossible. The British Raj created an all-encompassing surveillance mechanism which was aimed at anticipating mass upheavals. Armed with the experience of containing the wave of anti-colonial struggles during First World War, the colonial state apparatus braced for resurgence of popular movements and clandestine revolutionary actions as the war commenced. Individuals whose obedience seemed doubtful were summarily interned and restriction orders to his 'native place'⁶ were issued. Ex-revolutionaries, Communists, Forward Bloc activists, trade unionists, anti-colonial students and a host of other

⁵ Sanjukta Ghosh, 'Famine, Food and the Politics of Survival in Calcutta: 1943-1950', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited '*Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*' (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), p 204.

⁶ Ibid.

people from all walks of life were branded as ‘undesirables’ and experienced the wrath of the colonial justice system. Amongst the educated Bengalis a tiny section was attracted to the rise of totalitarian regimes in Germany and Italy in the inter-war period. The Nazi network had been tolerated by the colonial authorities for their virulent anti-communism. However the scenario changed radically as the war commenced in 1939. The figures associated with Axis powers now posed a serious threat to the safety and security of the Empire. For a select few it was the lure of money which dragged them into the Axis network⁷ and they acted as paid agents of the Axis powers. For the rest, adherence to the Axis cause was a conscious ideological choice.⁸

After the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the Imperial Japanese Army made lightning gains and the British regime made a hasty retreat from South-East Asia. As high-ranking colonial officials were rescued safely, Indians were left to fend for themselves. From 1942 onwards, fearful of Japanese retribution they started fleeing and entered Bengal after making a torturous journey through Burma, Assam and Manipur. The extreme hardship of the journey was such that many of the refugees perished en-route.⁹ The embattled colonial regime viewed the refugee influx with great suspicion as it was believed that Axis agents, saboteurs would use the cover of the refugee crisis to infiltrate the Indian mainland. Immigrants whose antecedents seemed unconvincing to paranoid intelligence officials had been charged under the draconian Defence of India Act and had to go through several rounds of interrogation coupled with imprisonment.

Preservation of the racial hierarchy was central to colonial ideology. With the advent of British power in the subcontinent, India received a steady stream of foreigners coming from neighbouring

⁷ WBSA IB 129/35

⁸ WBSA IB 45/32

⁹ Hugh Tinker, *A Forgotten Long March: The Indian Exodus from Burma, 1942*, (Journal of Southeast Asian Studies, Vol.6, No.1, March 1975,), p.14.

countries to faraway European nations. Their quest for lucrative professions often remained futile. As a section of the white population descended into poverty in India, they became a source of imperial embarrassment. A number of steps were taken to control the 'white vagrancy'. Apart from establishing a number of work-houses for their rehabilitation, targeted deportation of destitute whites were also practised.¹⁰ In official documents the 'mean whites' were castigated for 'eroding the moral authority' of the British Raj.¹¹ Migrants from Asian nations generally left to fend for themselves. They did not garner official attention unless they delve into the criminal underworld. With the commencement of the war in 1939, suspicion and anxiety on foreigners superseded the feeling of embarrassment in official circles. The British intelligence network made sweeping generalisations and citizens of different European nations such as Yugoslavs, Lithuanians, and Norwegians were considered as potential enemy agents along with Germans and Italians. They were prosecuted as 'enemy aliens' and a network of internment camps were established for them. In the inter-war period a section of Jewish population while fleeing from the growing clout of the Third Reich over Europe found refuge in India. Their systematic persecution continued unabated as the imperial state assumed that the Nazi regime would coerce the Jews for intelligence gathering as well as for orchestrating subversive actions targeting the war effort. To allay the colonial apprehension, refugees with Jewish descent remained under close observation of state agencies and in most cases had been restricted in internment camps throughout the war years.¹² Since First World War Bengal had an internment camp for non-combatant enemy subjects at Katapahar in Darjeeling hills. With the resumption of the war in 1939, this camp was reactivated and most 'enemy aliens' of Bengal were sent there.

¹⁰ Sarmistha De, *Marginal Europeans in Colonial India: 180-1920*, (Kolkata, Thema, 2008), pp. 145-151.

¹¹ Ibid. p.132.

¹² NAI 72/3/72/40-Pol(EW) 1940

The colonial apprehension of outsiders were not restricted to Europeans only, immigrants from Asian communities were also targeted. Throughout the first half of the 20th century China experienced internal strife and invasions from colonial powers culminating in the Second Sino-Japanese war in 1937. Resultant destabilisation of the society led a growing number of Chinese migrants to enter Bengal in quest of a decent living, which already had a sizeable Chinese migrant population.¹³ The fear of enemy infiltration¹⁴ as well as the involvement of a section of the Chinese and Tibetan migrants in the burgeoning criminal underworld¹⁵ put the immigrant community under intense official scrutiny. The Himalayan principality of Nepal had shared a frontier with Bengal. Following the treaty of Sagauli which ended the Anglo-Nepal war in 1816, the kingdom became a trusted ally of British imperialism¹⁶ and emerged as an important area for the recruitment of the imperial army. Quest of political shelter or economic prosperity led some Nepalese to venture into Bengal. By the 1930s the political ferment in Nepal led a section of Nepali activists to forge close ties with Indian revolutionaries in their bid to topple the autocratic regime of the Rana dynasty. For the embattled British imperial power as an important supplier of the military labour, Nepal's importance grew manifold. Hence the prospect of destabilisation of the subservient regime in Nepal created great anxiety amongst the official circles. To meet this challenge, Nepalese immigrants were kept under strict surveillance and individuals were frequently targeted for their

¹³ Tansen Sen had observed that the connection between India and China predates the colonial empire, ranging from diplomatic and commercial exchanges to pilgrimages aiming to visit sites related with Buddhism. With the advent of British Raj in India, apart from Calcutta, the crown jewel of the empire in the east, Himalayan towns of North Bengal- Kalimpong, Darjeeling etc. had attracted a steady stream of Chinese and Tibetan businessmen, migrants primarily for their proximity to trading routes through Himalayan passes.

Tansen Sen, *India, China and the World: A Connected History*, (The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., London, 2017).

¹⁴ Christopher J. Murphy '*Constituting a Problem in Themselves*': *Countering Covert Chinese Activity in India: The Life and Death of the Chinese Intelligence Section, 1944–46*, (The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, Taylor and Francis, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2016), p.930.

¹⁵ NAI 21/53/46 1946 Home Political.

¹⁶ Ali Riaz and Subho Basu, *Paradise Lost? State failure in Nepal*, (Estover Road, Plymouth, United Kingdom, Lexington Books, A division of Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., First Paperback Edition, 2010) p.34.

purported anti-Rana affiliations. The extent of colonial paranoia of outsiders was such that social drifters, Russian emigres were not spared from the state surveillance. Even Indian refugees from South-East Asia faced scrutiny and persecution as they fled the Japanese occupation. They had to make a torturous journey to enter the Indian mainland before being hauled up for interrogations and threatened with imprisonment as Japanese agents. Preceding sections testify that for the beleaguered colonial state almost every segment of Bengal inhabitants including the vagabonds, immigrants and refugees came under the aegis of suspicious subjects.

As Bengal became the staging ground of Allied armies in their effort to reclaim South-East Asia from Axis occupation, a large number of foreign troops amassed in army cantonments all over Bengal. It was not their ideological adherence to the enemy or their potential to halt the war economy, but their involvement in different shades of crime,¹⁷ ranging from sexual assault, drunken brawl, and burglary to murder and smuggling¹⁸ which had made them subject to surveillance. The state needed to check the 'rowdy' elements among the soldiers to mitigate the chasm between the foreign troops and the people. Apart from their involvement in criminal activities, foreign soldiers came under scrutiny and surveillance so that the anti-imperialist consciousness of the colonised subjects could not make inroads among them. Foreign army-men having left-wing sympathies in their countries of origin, often tried to forge ties with various left groups. Amalendu Sengupta in *Uttal Challish Asampato Biplab* recollected how communist army-men from various nations frequented the Indian People's Theatre Association office in Calcutta and immersed themselves in impromptu performances staged by the activists.¹⁹ Archival

¹⁷ Janam Mukherjee, '*Japan Attacks*', in Tanika Sarkar and Sekhar Bandyopadhyay edited *Calcutta: The Stormy Decades*, (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2015), p.99.

¹⁸ WBSA IB 1127/46 [M.F.].

¹⁹ Amalendu Sengupta, *Uttal Challish Asampato Biplab*, (Kolkata, Pearl Publishers, 1957), pp.28,29.

documents show that the colonial government actively discouraged this bonhomie to the extent of punishing individual soldiers with internment.²⁰

In this sense, segments of population in wartime Bengal, inhabiting the same space and time yet divided by social and material locations, form the focus of my thesis. What connected them was the thread of official attention. They were all subjects under suspicion.

Chapter Division

Chapters are formulated to reflect the multifarious repercussions of Second World War at the microscopic-level. This thesis portrays fragmented life-stories of forlorn figures, long-forgotten networks and persecuted individuals. It is divided into five chapters. The first chapter delves into life-stories of individuals who were branded as ‘undesirables’ in official parlance. For the embattled regime trade-unionists, anti-colonial activists of different shades, Germany trained engineers, ex-revolutionaries, Communists and Forward Bloc activists came under the aegis of ‘potential threats’. Their internment order to Bengal had been coupled with stringent conditions aimed to control almost every aspect of their lives.

Changing dimensions of transnational connections that were forged in Bengal during the last decade of colonial rule form the focus of the second chapter. Throughout the period of colonial rule Bengal acted as a gateway for Tibetans, Chinese and Nepalese individuals who sought to enter the Indian mainland in search of a decent living. The steady stream of migration gathered its pace as people of South Asia faced Japanese invasion, economic crisis and political turmoil. Sleepy Himalayan towns of North Bengal such as Kalimpong and Kurseong transformed into important

²⁰ WBSA IB 331/39.

transit points for cross-border smuggling involving Tibetan and Chinese migrants. The passage of arms through this corridor became a point of concern for the colonial establishment. During Second World War Ramgarh in modern day Chattisgarh had a major base of the Chinese army. Keeping a tab on the activity of the Chinese deserters in Bengal, which already had a sizeable Chinese migrant population proved to be a daunting task for the embattled state apparatus. As Nepal became an important catchment area for the recruitment of soldiers, to please its rulers the colonial authority came down heavily on Nepalese fugitive networks in Bengal and beyond. This chapter examines these obscure networks as well as shed light on individuals involved in these endeavours. After Allied retreat from South-East Asia, Indian evacuees also trudged their way to Bengal and came under intense scrutiny as the imperial state was apprehensive for the infiltration of Axis agents using the cover of refugee influx. In the second chapter the predicaments of Burma evacuees are also portrayed along with Chinese immigrants and Nepalese fugitives.

The third chapter delves into the activities of Axis sympathisers of Bengal. Throughout the interwar period, British imperialism tolerated Nazi propaganda for their virulent anti-Bolshevism as the colonial state perceived communists as one of the biggest threats along with revolutionary nationalists. It was only after the Munich pact of 1938, when the British state finally realised the gravity of danger posed by imperialist ambitions of Axis powers. Subhas Bose and his followers became important targets of imperial surveillance as they made an ambitious attempt to uproot the colonial regime with the help of Axis powers. The din of the war and the prospect of an imminent Japanese attack on Bengal, attracted a section of tricksters who chose to support the Axis cause in exchange of money. There were also select individuals in wartime Bengal who, enamoured by Nazi ideology became steadfast allies of the Third Reich and its war against Britain. These

disparate characters, who remained under close surveillance as potential enemy agents through the war years are discussed in this context.

The fourth chapter traces the life-journey of Europeans branded as ‘enemy aliens’. The colonial intelligence apparatus believed that hostile nations would activate previously dormant channels to serve their interest and concluded that ‘Britain's wartime enemies are different from peacetime opponents’.²¹ Foreign professionals, missionaries and wives of British or British-Indian subjects having roots in enemy nations emerged as prime suspects. In the inter-war period a section of Jews while fleeing from the growing clout of the Third Reich over Europe found refuge in India. They were also targeted as colonial intelligence officials believed that Jews could be coerced by the Nazi regime to be used as ‘fifth columnists’. Echoing Nazi racial theory, the colonial bureaucracy divided the ‘enemy aliens’ into ‘Aryan’ and ‘non-Aryan’ lines and a network of internment camps, parole centres came up to imprison them during the war years. The internment camp at Katapahar in Darjeeling hills which began its journey during First World War was reactivated as the war commenced in 1939. For many of the Jews state sponsored persecution did not end with their flight from the clutches of the Third Reich. The fear of repression was such that it drove a dental surgeon from Quetta in modern-day Pakistan to suicide.²² In Bengal even anti-Nazi activists were not spared.²³ To escape internments many of the Jews served the war effort in various capacities. Antecedents of long-forgotten characters who had spent the war-years in Katapahar camp constitute a significant theme of my chapter. It also serves the purpose of portraying certain dimensions of quotidian lives inside the internment camp. By documenting war-time experiences

²¹ WBSA IB 108/39 1939 Foreigners.

²² NAI 43/14/41-Pol(EW).

²³ NAI 72/3/76/40-Pol(EW).

of ‘enemy aliens’ this chapter probes the ramifications of the stifling state surveillance on Jewish refugees in Bengal.

The fifth chapter explores nuances of layered interactions between the common people of Bengal and foreign troops deployed to counter the Japanese incursion. In the process, the criminal underworld on the eve of colonialism’s end is uncovered. It also shed some light on the involvement of a section of foreign troops in criminal activities ranging from robbery to smuggling with a focus on revelations made by the police investigation on the murder of a British army deserter. The chapter also provides glimpses of Chinese deserters who chose to eke out living with the help of the large immigrant Chinese population in Calcutta. This chapter steps beyond the time-frame of war and concentrates on the immediate post-war years as economic and social dislocation made its presence felt through the increasing brutalisation of Bengali society. For the deserters it was the threat of demobilisation after the end of the war and the lure of the thriving underworld in late-colonial Bengal that came together in shaping their life choices.

Sources

Most of the research is based on Intelligence Branch reports available in West Bengal State Archives, Special Branch reports available in Kolkata Police Museum, Home Political files available in the web-portal of National Archives of India (<https://www.abhilekh-patal.in>). Memoirs and autobiographies of reporters, political activists and intellectuals who lived in Bengal during this tumultuous period such as Kalim Sharafi,²⁴ Manikuntala Sen²⁵, Tapan Raychaudhuri²⁶,

²⁴ Kalim Sharafi, *Smriti Amrita*, (Dhaka, Agami Prakashani, 1993).

²⁵ Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner Kotha*,(Calcutta, Nabapatra Prakashan, 1982).

²⁶ Tapan Roychowdhury, *Bangalnama*, (Kolkata, Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2007).

Mihir Sen²⁷, Subrata Banerjee²⁸ and Abul Mansur Ahmed²⁹ form an integral part of primary literature used in dissertation.

Conclusion

This is a study of wartime surveillance on obscure lives and opens up a window into the intermeshing of race, class, gender and radical political positions during the last days of the Raj. In his article, Partha Sarathi Gupta elucidated how colonial officialdom grudgingly admitted the ‘credibility gap’ as well as the absence of ‘adequate communication channel’ between the Raj and Indian masses in post-war scenario.³⁰ My dissertation underlined that the process of isolation had commenced earlier. The close-knit surveillance mechanism and outright repression which became hallmarks of the wartime colonial state, stemmed from its diminishing popular support. The ‘credibility gap’ of the war effort had manifested itself as the beleaguered regime effectively put seemingly innocuous individuals i.e. runaway kids, drifters, Jewish migrants, Indo-Burmese refugees under strict surveillance.

In Bengal, Second World War had produced a cataclysmic effect to shake every social segment and unleashed forces which eventually changed the social fabric of Bengal permanently. This dissertation is an effort to document the ravages at a microscopic level. As the late-colonial regime clung to power, fragmented life-stories of subjects under perpetual suspicion of the wartime state provided the ideal background to explore trepidations of a moribund regime. Individual stories of

²⁷ Mihir Sengupta, *Bishadbrikha*, (Kolkata, Ananda Publishers Private Limited, 2013).

²⁸ Subrata Banerjee, *Fragments of Time: Memoirs of a Romantic Revolutionary*, (Chandigarh, Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 2017).

²⁹ Abul Mansur Ahmad, *Amar Dekha Rajneetir Panchash Baochhor*, (Dhaka, Khosraj Kitab Mahal, 1995).

³⁰ Partha Sarathi Gupta, *Imperial Strategy and the Transfer of Power, 1939-51* in Amit Kumar Gupta edited *Myth and Reality: The Struggle for Freedom in India 1945-47*, (New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1987). p.8.

devastation and persecution recollected through the chapters of the thesis reveal a critical juncture of the subcontinent and its people. By depicting social responses, relationships and survival strategies of relatively obscure individuals, collectives and networks through police dossiers, this dissertation seeks to locate unexplored facets of state control over obscure and forgotten people living in late-colonial Bengal. As creatures of a fractured time, the characters explored here had been rife with angst and apprehension. They reflect a bygone era seething with latent tension. The thesis is an attempt to recover and rearticulate obscure life-stories of men and women who had earned the wrath of the belligerent regime, yet remained outside the ambit of historical narratives.