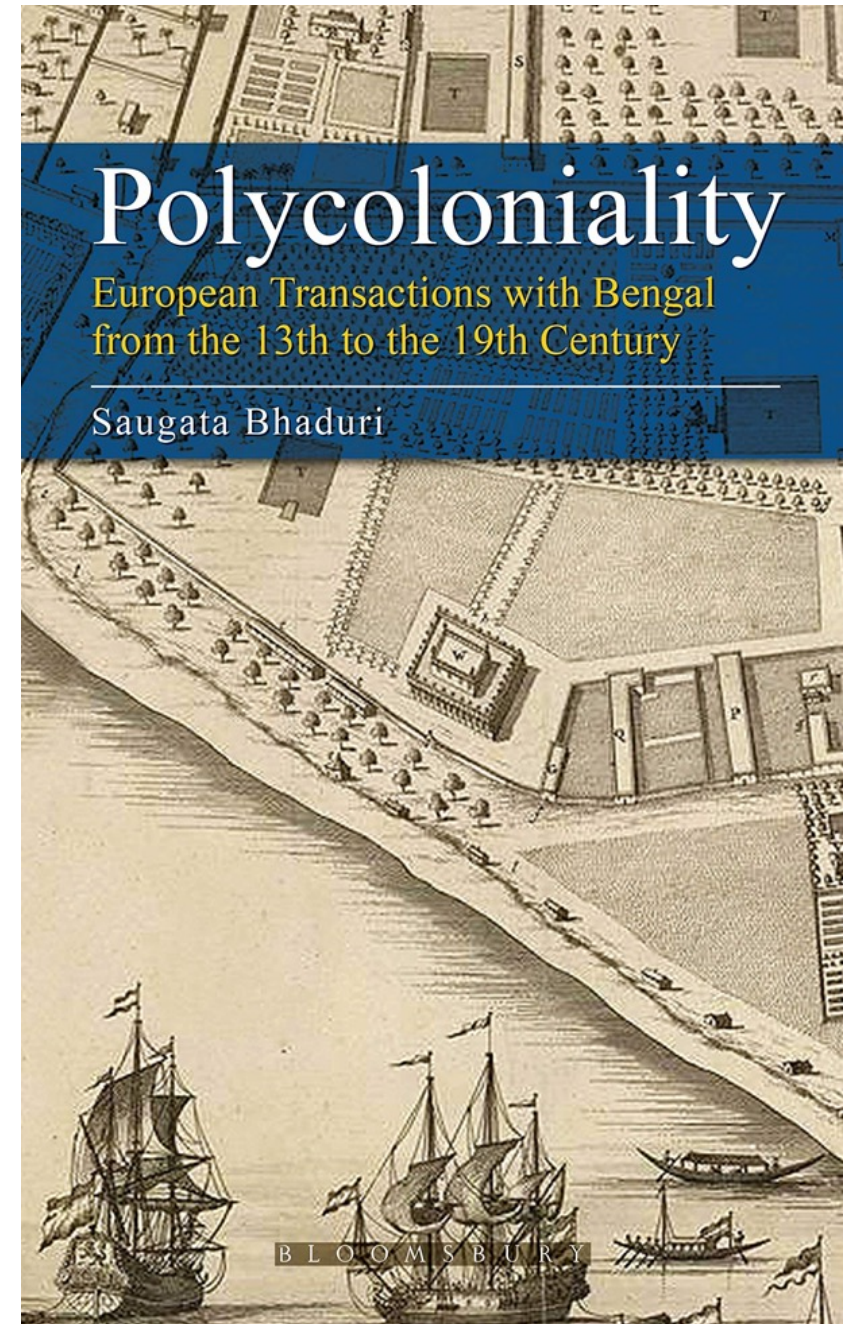


# Postcolonialism and Its Discontents: Towards Polycoloniality

Saugata Bhaduri



# The Problem

- The ‘postcolonial commonsense’:
  - Mononational understanding of each colonial encounter (e.g. India by the British, Brazil by the Portuguese, Indonesia by the Dutch, etc.)
  - Focus more on the (terrestrial) ‘roots’ and loci of colonization rather than the (oceanic) ‘routes’ of colonization, with intersections
  - Monolingual formulations about the resultant literary/cultural outputs and of colonial modernity (there can be linguistically specific transnational categories like Anglophone ‘commonwealth literature’ or Francophone or Lusophone literatures, but no immediate scope for intersections amongst these and of the plural networks at work)
  - Vocabulary inadequate to theorize continuing colonization through multinational imperialism and need for sustained and recurrent decolonization
  - Decolonization and Resistance also visualised only in mononational/monocultural terms, through insular nationalisms, leading to possible jingoisms, xenophobia, and communal fascism

# The way out?

- ‘Polycoloniality’

- What is Polycoloniality? [Erstwhile colonization, and resultant colonial modernity and decolonization, were not effected by, or directed against, any one nation, but multiple European powers simultaneously]

(Saugata Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality: European Transactions with Bengal from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Bloomsbury, 2020)

- Polycoloniality allows for an understanding of our brush with colonial modernity and decolonization beyond mononationalism
- Beyond Manichaeism and insular Nationalisms: Resistance as non-sectarian, pluricultural, and hybrid
- Polycoloniality allows for theorizing imperialism in multinational terms
- Solidarity of the oppressed: whether a part of the Global South was primarily colonized by the English, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, or French, etc., we are all part of a shared entangled history of polycolonial interpellation

# Polycoloniality in Bengal

- Bengal (and the Indian subcontinent itself) was, of course, colonized majorly by the English (1650-1947; in some parts of India from 1611)

But, also by

- the Portuguese (1514–1797; de facto in Bandel, with some formal administrative powers, till 1869; in some parts of India from 1498 till 1961),
- the Dutch (1623–1825; in some parts of India from 1606),
- the French (1673–1950; in some parts of India from 1668 till 1954),
- the Danish (1698–1845; in some parts of India from 1620 till 1868),
- The ‘Germans’ [the Austrians (1723–1794), the Prussians (1753–1760)],
- the Swedes (1731–1811; the years of their trade with Bengal), and
- the Greeks (c.17th century–?)

Further, prior to all this, there was a steady flow of European travellers to, and travel accounts about, Bengal from the late 13<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries

# Early Modern 'Pre-Colonial' European Travellers to Bengal

- The Italian, Marco Polo (1254–1324) mentions Bengal in Chapter XLII of Book II of his *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (1298–1299), and writes an entire chapter, Chapter XLV: 'Of the Province of Bangala'. If he visited Bengal, it has to be before 1290, in the 1270s-80s, to which Book II conforms
- The Italian, John of Montecorvino (1247–1328), visited the east coast of India and probably up to Bengal, and wrote a letter about the same on 22 December 1292
- [One can note also the Moroccan Ibn Battuta (1304–c.1368; 1345; 1355), the French Jordanus Catalani (c.1280–c.1330; 1320s; 1329-38), the Italian Odoric of Pordenone (1286–1331; 1320s; 1350), the Italian Giovanni de' Marignolli (1290–c.1359; 1346; 1355), and the Russian Afanasy Nikitin (c.1433–1472; 1466-72; 1489), because the first was not European and the others visited other parts of India, not Bengal]
- The Italian, Nicolo Conti (1395–1469), travelled through Bengal in the 1430s, and narrated it in his travelogue, *The Travels of Nicolo Conti, in the East* (1444)
- The Italian, Ludovico di Varthema (1470–1517), came to Bengal in 1505, and wrote about it in two chapters—'Chapter concerning the City of Banghella' and 'Chapter concerning some Christian Merchants in Banghella' in 'The Third Book Concerning India', in his elaborate, *The Itinerary of Ludovico di Varthema of Bologna from 1502 to 1508* (1510)
- The Portuguese, Duarte Barbosa (c. 1480–1521), visited Bengal in the 1510s, and describes this in §102 'The Kingdom of Bengala' in Vol. 2 of his *The Book of Duarte Barbosa* (1516)
- The French, Vincent le Blanc (1554–c.1640), visited Bengal in 1575, and wrote about it in Chapter 22, 'Of the kingdom of Bengala, and Ternassery', of the First Part of his *The World Surveyed: Or, The Famous Voyages & Travailes of Vincent le Blanc, or White, of Marseilles* (1648)
- The Dutch, Jan Huyghen Van Linschoten (1563–1611), visits Bengal in the 1580s, and writes about it in Chapter 16 of Vol. 1 of his *The Voyage of John Huyghen Van Linschoten to the East Indies* (1596)
- The English, Ralph Fitch (1550-1611), visited Bengal in 1586 and in 1588-89, and we have his travelogue *Ralph Fitch, England's pioneer to India and Burma; his companions and contemporaries, with his remarkable narrative told in his own words* (1591)

## The English in Bengal (1586; 1650-1947)

- The first recorded Englishman to have come to Bengal was Ralph Fitch (1550-1611), a representative of the Levant Company, established in 1581, in 1586 and in 1588-89.
- The English East India Company was established in 1600, its first official fleet reached Surat in 1608, and its first colonies established in Masulipatnam (1611) and Surat (1612), but only after the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hooghly by the Mughals in 1632, and the subsequent elbowing of the Dutch, in 1650, the English could establish a factory at Hooghly and in December, James Bridgeman was sent with three assistants to establish a settlement there.
- By 1657, the English had other establishments in greater Bengal—at Balasore, Kasimbazar and Patna, and Hooghly was made the head agency for these subordinate stations, but itself subordinate to Madras.
- In 1679, the Bengal Factories were formally recognized and the trading came under the control of the Chief and a Council of Four at Hooghly, and in 1681, they were made independent of Madras, and William Hedges was appointed the first Agent and Governor of Bengal, stationed at Hooghly.
- In 1682, the English got a *farman* from Aurangzeb to govern the area, but being refused the permission to build a fort at the mouth of the river Hooghly by the governor of Bengal, Shaista Khan, in 1685, the Company requested King James II to permit the use of force against the Mughal army.
- Job Charnock reached Hooghly from Madras with a troop of 400, but beaten by Shaista Khan on 28 October 1686, had to retreat further downstream to Sutanuti, where he reached on 20 December 1686. Charnock thought this place as appropriate to build the English capital in Bengal, and from January 1687, repeatedly sought permission from the Mughal emperor, which was granted by Aurangzeb through another *farman*, and Charnock returned to Sutanuti on 24 August 1690, and hoisted the Royal Standards of England, ‘founding’ the English city of Calcutta.
- After Charnock’s death in January 1692, in 1696, his son-in-law Sir Charles Eyre started work on constructing Fort William, and on 10 November 1698, formally leased three contiguous villages—Sutanuti, Kalikata, and Gobindapur—from the landlord Sabarna Roy Choudhury, to build the city of Calcutta around the fort. In December 1699, Eyre was appointed the first President and Governor of Bengal, stationed in Calcutta.
- In 1699, a rival English Company was formed for Hooghly, under the name ‘The English Company Trading to the East Indies’, and its President and Agent made his headquarters at Hooghly, independent of the establishment at Calcutta.
- The two companies were merged in April 1702, when orders were sent to the President to quit Hooghly and retire to Calcutta, which was done in 1704, with Hooghly being handed over to the Mughal *faujdar* (de facto to the Dutch).

# The Portuguese in Bengal (c. 1510?; 1514-1797)

- Initial contacts with Bengal from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- First recorded Portuguese who visited Bengal is Duarte Barbosa (c.1480-1521), in around 1510
- First Portuguese settlement in Bengal in 1514 in Hijli in Midnapore.
- Colonization in Bengal in earnest began from 1518 with the conquest of Chittagong, extended through conquests of other places in deltaic eastern Bengal, particularly Sandwip and Dianga.
- Consolidated further with the setting up of a colony in Satgaon in 1536-1537, formally sanctioned by the Sultan of Bengal, Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah.
- With the progressive silting up of the Satgaon port, the Portuguese set up a trading post by the 1560s at Betor, in the neighbourhood of today's Howrah.
- Establishment of a major colony in Hooghly in 1579 with a formal *farman* or permission from the Mughal emperor Akbar.
- Lost Hooghly to the Mughals in 1632 and almost all their east Bengal colonies by 1665, but were permitted by Shahjahan in 1633 to establish their longest lasting church-colony in Bengal in Bandel, just north of Hooghly.
- Bandel continued to be an autonomous Portuguese-governed territory till 1797, when the English took it over, though they exercised certain powers till 1869.

# The Dutch in Bengal (c. 1585; 1623–1825)

- The first Dutchman to have come to Bengal was Jan Huyghen van Linschoten (1563-1611), who visited Satgaon in the mid-1580s, and writes about it.
- The Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), or the United East India Company, was formed in 1602. Explorations to Bengal started by 1615.
- Around 1623, VOC established its first factory in Bengal in Portuguese Hooghly.
- After the ouster of the Portuguese from Hooghly in 1632, the Dutch were permitted by the Mughal emperor Shahjahan in 1634 to administer Hooghly, which they lost to the English in 1650, but regained by 1704.
- In 1651, after the loss of Hooghly, the Dutch founded a new fortified colony at Chinsurah, just south of Hooghly.
- By 1656, the Dutch had colonies in several other parts of Bengal, including Baranagar in what is today's north Kolkata.
- Lost their colonies to the English in 1781-1783 and 1795-1802 (*de facto* 1814).
- Baranagar was permanently ceded to the English in 1795, while the other Dutch colonies, including Hooghly-Chinsurah, survived until 7 May 1825, when in pursuit of their interests in Indonesia, they ceded it to the English in lieu of Bencoolen in the island of Sumatra, through the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London, March 1824.



# The French in Bengal (1575; 1673–1950)

- The first Frenchman to visit Bengal was Vincent le Blanc (1554-c.1640), who visited Satgaon (Sartagan/Sartogan) in 1575, and writes about it.
- La Compagnie française des Indes orientales, or the French East India Company, was formed in 1642.
- The first French establishment in Bengal was a warehouse set up in 1673 at Taldanga in Barokishanpur, in north Chandernagore, a few kilometres south of Chinsurah, on land given by Ibrahim Khan, the Nawab of Bengal, but it was abandoned by 1676.
- Chandernagore was officially established as a French colony from 1688, with formal Mughal sanction procured from Aurangzeb in 1693, and fortified in 1701.
- The French had another enclave at Gareeti/Goretty/Ghereti (Gourhati) a few kilometres south of Chandernagore (between today's Bhadreswar and Baidyabati).
- Fluctuating Anglo-French relations in both Bengal and Europe led to Chandernagore being ceded to the English in 1757-1763 and 1793-1816.
- But Chandernagore remained a French colony till 2 May 1950, when through a referendum held on 19 June 1949, where an overwhelming majority of the colony decided to join India, it was transferred to the Union of India (*de jure* transfer on 9 June 1952).

# The Danish in Bengal (1698–1845)

- King Christian IV of Denmark-Norway founded the Dansk Østindisk Kompagni or the Danish East India Company on 17 March 1616.
- The Danes set up their first colony in Tranquebar (Tharangambadi in today's Tamil Nadu) in 1620, and in Pipli (1623) and Balasore (1636), both in today's Odisha, and very close to the Bengal border, but their arrival to Bengal was much later.
- On 20 May 1673, the Danes obtained a general permission, and on 5 August 1676, a special permission to trade in Bengal, but did not have a formal imperial *farman*.
- In 1698 they were permitted by the Mughal governor of Bengal to set up a factory at Gondalpara, a couple of kilometres south of Chandernagore, which they renamed as Danmarksnagore, and held till 1714, and again from 1721 to 1728.
- In 1729, the Danish East India Company went into liquidation, and on 12 April 1732, King Christian VI formed a new company, the Asiatisk Kompagni.
- On 15 July 1755, Alivardi Khan, the Nawab of Bengal, permitted the Danes to settle at Serampore, around 20 kilometres south of Gondalpara, which they built up like a colony and named Frederiksnagore.
- This demi-colony of Serampore was temporarily lost to the English in 1801-1802 and 1808-1815, after which the Danes held on to it till 11 October 1845, when it was permanently transferred to the English.

## The 'Germans' [Austrians] in Bengal (1723–1794)

- The first 'German', actually the Austrian empire's, colonial attempts in Bengal were operated by Flemish merchants, through a series of companies collectively called Austrian East India Companies.
- The oldest of these companies was the Ostend Company (in Flemish, the Oostendse Compagnie, or Generale Indische Compagnie), chartered by the Austrian Emperor Karl VI on 17 December 1722.
- In 1723, with assistance from the French, it procured permission from the then Nawab of Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan, to build a factory at Banquibazar (Bankibazar, also Bankipur) and Hydsapour (today's Ichapur), a contiguous area on the east bank of the Hooghly, just north of today's Barrackpore.
- The Ostend Company was abolished by the early 1730s, but Bankibazar was transferred to direct Austrian imperial ownership and held on till 1744.
- The colony of Bankibazar-Ichapur gained a second lease of life with three new Austrian East India Companies set up serially in Antwerp and Trieste in 1775, 1781 and 1785, all helmed by William Bolts (or Wilhelm Boltz), and was held on to till 1794.

## The 'Germans' [Prussians] in Bengal (1753–1760)

- The other 'German' colony was a result of the King of Prussia, Frederick the Great or Friedrich der Große, having annexed East Friesland and the port town of Emden in it by 1744.
- He established two companies – the Royal Prussian Asiatic Company in Emden to Canton and China (Königlich Preußische Asiatische Compagnie in Emden nach Canton und China) in 1750 to trade with China, and the Bengal Company (Bengalische Handelsgesellschaft) in 1753, both collectively referred to as 'Emden (or Embden) Company'.
- The Emden Company had its short-lived demi-colony in Bengal, referred to as the 'Prussian Gardens', around today's Bhadreswar, just south of Chandernagore, which they held for a brief period from around 1753 to when they ceded it to the English on 21 August 1760.

## The Swedes in Bengal (1731–1811)

- Sweden did not have a settled colony, but undertook colonial trade with Bengal under the Swedish East India Company (*Svenska Ostindiska Companiet*, or SOIC), founded in Gothenburg on 13 June 1731.
- This could happen only after the impending abolition of the Ostend Company, though there were earlier abortive attempts in 1626 and 1718 to have such a Swedish trading company.
- The Swedish conducted trade with Bengal (and other parts of India) under four different Octroi-s, and in spite of getting offers to set up a formal colony in India, particularly in Karaikal from the French, they chose to retain their itinerant maritime status.
- Since they did not have a settled colony in Bengal, the dates given here are of the company being founded and getting bankrupt, i.e. the possible range of dates of its colonial trade with Bengal.

## The Greeks in Bengal (c.17<sup>th</sup> century-?)

- If the Swedish were curious 'colonisers' in Bengal, insofar as they were a European nation without a colony, the Greeks were equally curious as a European people with a colony in Bengal, but no nation to themselves, at least till 1832.
- The Greeks settled in Bengal as a trading community, and not as colonial administrators of any description, as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century and concentrated in the major cities of Kolkata and Dhaka.
- They also had an exclusive Greek settlement at Rishra, around five kilometres south of Serampore, which can be considered as somewhat of a 'colony' or at least an enclave.
- They stayed on in Bengal well into the 20th century, and not being a formal administrative colonial power, their dates of Bengal sojourn cannot be cited with any certainty.

# Polycolonial Modernity

There are seven registers through which a culture gets initiated into 'colonial modernity', the first two pertaining to the substance of literature and culture, and the remaining five to the sensibility, milieu, and infrastructure required for 'modern' articulations:

1. a definitive impact of the colonizer's language on the colonized's language and literature;
2. a defining 'modernizing' influence of the colonizer on non-literary cultural forms, like visual and performance arts;
3. an enabling exposure to urban cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, hybridity, diaspora;
4. a systematic initiation into institutionalised 'western', particularly higher, education;
5. induction of print as a dominant medium of articulation of ideas;
6. introduction of 'progressive' socio-political reforms, in defiance of traditional practices;
7. the creation of the possibility of resistance and revolution, leading to decolonisation.

Let me discuss these one after the other, to show how, for Bengal, they were all polycolonial, rather than English-induced.

# 1. The polycolonial influence on Bengali language and literature

- While English loan words in Bengali language are generally identified as foreign, the indelibility of the Portuguese mark on Bengali is seen in how what we consider to be natural Bengali words for several common objects are actually Portuguese loan words, like:  
baciõ–bāsan (utensil); balde–bālti (bucket); boiãõ–boyām (jar); cadeira–kedārā (chair); chave–chābi (key); chapa–chhāpā (stamp/print); estirar–istiri (to iron); fita–fitā (ribbon); falso–fāltu (unnecessary/excessive); janela–jānāla (window); mes-acabar–mās-kābār (month-end); pipa–pipā (keg); pires–pirich (saucer); saia–sāyā (petticoat)
- More than the English, canonical texts of Bengali literature from the 16th to the 18th century refer to the Portuguese and the Dutch—the *firingi* or *harmad* and the *olandaj*—and modern Bengali folklore, especially in the southern coastal parts of Bengal, abound with references to people from these two European nations.
- The first piece of prose writing in Bengali is by a Portuguese, Father Dominic De Souza, who translated a religious tract into Bengali before 1599.
- The first book-length prose work in Bengali is also with a multicultural Portuguese connection, it being the 1660s 120-page long *Brahman–Roman Catholic Sambad* by Dom Antonio de Rozario (b.1643), also one of the first Bengali books to be printed in 1734.



## 2. The polycolonial influence on Bengali visual and performative cultures

### a) 'Modern' Visual Arts in Bengal:

- By the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with diminishing influence of Mughal miniature art, affluent traders, mostly from Dutch Chinsurah and French Chandernagore, started commissioning local and European artists to create portraits and landscapes with Indian religious subjects but influenced by European ideas of image-making.
- This hybrid exercise of miniature artists picking up oil and canvas as medium and adding perspective, and European artists picking up Indian, usually mythological and religious, subjects and incorporating miniature techniques in their execution, led to what is generally referred to as the 'Dutch Bengal' (at times 'French Bengal') school of art.
- These paintings, emerging from the Dutch and French colonies in Bengal, by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, entered the mass market through the print medium from Calcutta studios too, through bulk production of brightly colourful lithographs representing popular deities, aimed to be sold at very cheap rates to average households.
- (They mostly predate Raja Ravi Varma's 1894 establishment of his press in Ghatkopar and the mass production of his oleographs also exhibiting a similar fusion.)
- This mode of art, also known as Pre-Bengal School art, survives as 'popular art' even today in its print avatar of religious kitsch aimed for mass consumption.

## 2. The polycolonial influence on Bengali visual and performative cultures

### b) 'Modern' Performative Arts in Bengal:

- Proscenium Theatre in Bengal was, to begin with, not an English, but a polycolonial product, with Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev (1749–1817) from Yaroslavl, Russia, introducing proscenium theatre in Bengali, with his 1795 adaptations of Molière's *Love Is the Best Doctor* and Richard Jodrell's *The Disguise*, with a Bengali cast and crew, at the New Theatre on Ezra Street in Kolkata that he himself built, the earliest Bengali play to be staged in Calcutta thus being an adaptation of a French playwright by a Russian at a theatre on a street named after a Jew.
- Like proscenium, the modern, subaltern-popular, 'low' urban performance forms – like kabigaan, kheur, etc. – also arose from the French Chandernagore, due to the greater caste-class-gender fluidity there, and invaded Calcutta therefrom.

(See Sumanta Banerjee, *A Tale of Two Cities under Colonial Rule: Chandernagore and Calcutta*. IIC Occasional Publication 39, New Delhi: India International Centre, 27 April 2012.)

- This is best exemplified by Hensman Anthony, or Anthony Firingi (1786–1836), a Portuguese (or, more likely, Luso-Indian), from French Chandernagore (Gareeti), a true 'polycolonial'.

### 3. The polycolonial bases of urban culture, hybridity, diaspora

#### a) Urban Cosmopolitanism

- It is under the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, that the Bandel–Hooghly–Chinsurah belt became the first truly urban, multicultural, cosmopolitan space in Bengal, much before British Calcutta.
- Further, it is the French and the Danish that gave Bengal the possibility of its first urban public spheres, with Chandernagore and Serampore emerging as ‘cities’ with mansions, a strand along the river, and hotels, somewhat before Calcutta had any of these.
- Even Calcutta—which monocolonial historical perspectives would have us believe was apparently established by the British on 24 August 1690—was already settled in and used for trading purposes by the Portuguese at Betor in Shibpur, Howrah, opposite Garden Reach in the current Kolkata Port area from as early as the 1560s, by the Armenians in Sutanuti in today’s central Kolkata before the 1630s, and by the Dutch in Baranagar, in today’s north Kolkata, from the 1650s, and the British just filled in the gaps.
- Similarly, Dhaka was also settled in by the Portuguese from 1580 and the Dutch from 1636, much before the British.

### 3. The polycolonial bases of urban culture, hybridity, diaspora

#### b) Hybridity, Diaspora, etc.

- Christianity came to Bengal, and led to hybridity, through the Portuguese, with their Jesuit Mission in Hooghly dating back to 1576 and the Augustinian Mission to 1580 (with the iconic Bandel Church constructed in 1599), and churches in Chittagong and Dhaka in East Bengal from 1600; and the Armenians with their Apostolic Church (the Old Armenian Church in Calcutta dates back to 1688).
- Not just Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic branches of Christianity, Bengalis were exposed to even Anglican Christianity, not through the English colonial administration, which had banned all missionary activity in its territories till 1813, but through the Baptist Mission in Danish Serampore, which because of its being outside British colonial purview, could allow proselytising activities.
- The beginnings of Bengalis having become diasporic in modern times was because of the flourishing slave trade in Bengal led first by the Arabs and Arakanese and then by the Portuguese and the Dutch.
- South Asians were also employed as sailors, or *lascars* as they were called, in significant numbers in European ships from the 16<sup>th</sup> century itself. The lascars, many of whom were Bengalis, would not only travel the world but also often settle in European countries, leading to a sizeable polycoloniality-induced Bengali diaspora in Europe.
- Though one finds some Indians in England as early as the mid-sixteenth century, and the first recorded Bengali was brought to England in the summer of 1614, and baptised on 22 December 1616 as Peter Pope (a name chosen by King James I himself), Bengali slaves and indentured labourers were shipped to European settlements in the Caribbean, the Pacific islands, the southern African mainland and the islands off its coast, and to Europe in far greater numbers by the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the French.
- Particularly Bengalis in the Cape region in South Africa from 1652 onwards, who went on to become successful pillars of the Afrikaner society, has been well noted.

## 4. The polycolonial establishment of 'western' educational institutions

### a) Oldest 'Western' school for children in Bengal (Portuguese):

- The oldest 'western' school for children in Bengal was the College of São Paulo established by the Portuguese Jesuits in Bandel in 1599.

[The oldest English school was the Charity School on Free School Street in Calcutta established between 1726 and 1731, probably in 1729, re-organised as the 'Calcutta Free School' in 1789, further renamed St Thomas' School and moved to its current Kidderpore campus in 1923.]

### b) Oldest 'Western' College in Bengal (Dutch):

- The first college in Bengal, founded to impart secular higher education to the general public, was Hooghly College, established in Dutch Chinsurah in 1812 (currently the Hooghly Collegiate School, as it was renamed in 1836, after the school wing was separated from the college wing, and the latter was named the New Hooghly College, currently Hooghly Mohsin College).

[Though two colonial modern higher educational institutions in British Calcutta are older than the Hooghly College—The Calcutta Madrassa, established in 1781 (currently Aliah University), and the Fort William College, established in 1800 and closed down in 1854—they were either not for secular education or not open to the general public; Hindu College (1817, now Presidency University), the first general college in Calcutta, was founded five years after Hooghly College.]

### c) Oldest 'Western' University in Bengal (Danish):

- The Serampore College, established in 1818, became a full-fledged university in 1827, when King Frederick VI of Denmark, through a 'Royal Charter of Incorporation' on 23 February 1827, empowered the college to formally confer degrees, making it the oldest 'university' in Asia.

[The University of Calcutta was established thirty years later in 1857.]

## 5. The polycolonial initiation of Bengal into print culture

- Bengal was a very late starter in print.
- In the rest of India (also polycolonially), printing presses were set up: in 1556 in Portuguese Goa; in 1569 in the then Portuguese and soon-to-be Danish Tranquebar; in 1578 and 1579 in the then Portuguese and soon-to-be Dutch Quilon and Cochin respectively; in 1674 in English (till very recently Dutch and Portuguese, respectively) Surat and Bombay; in 1675 in Portuguese Ambalagakad; in 1712 in Danish Tranquebar; and in the 1750s in French Pondicherry to be transferred in 1756 to English Madras; while it is only the 1770s type foundry in Dutch Chinsurah that led to the first press in Bengal in 1777.
- The first trio of full-length books in Bengali were printed in the Roman script from Lisbon in 1743: the 1660s *Brahman–Roman–Catholic Sambah* by Dom Antonio de Rozario, and two books by Manoel da Assumpção, the Augustinian Rector of the Mission of St Nicolas of Tolentino at Nagori in Bhowal near Dhaka—*Crepar Xaxtrer Orth, Bhed (Kripār Śāstrer Arthabhed*, in more acceptable Bengali orthography in transliteration), composed in 1735; and the first grammar of Bengali, *Vocabolario em idioma Bengalla, e Portuguez dividido em duas partes*, a book in two sections, comprising first a brief grammar of Bengali and then a Bengali-Portuguese bilingual dictionary, written between 1734 and 1742.

## 5. The polycolonial initiation of Bengal into print culture

- While these were in the Roman script, Bengali characters were already printed in Europe by the 1660s, rather polycolonially by the Germans, the Dutch, the French and the Portuguese, but not by the English. To quote about such early instances:
- “Bengali characters were printed from plates as early as 1667 in Athanasius Kircher’s *China Illustrata* published from Amsterdam. There were at least seven other books, a few by Portuguese authors publishing from Lisbon, that printed samples of Bengali letters using the same process.”  
[Sukanta Chaudhuri (pub.), *Printing and Book Production in Bengal* (Brochure for an Exhibition by the same name at Rabindranath Tagore Centre, Kolkata, February 14–21, 2009). Kolkata: School of Cultural Texts and Records, Jadavpur University, 2009, p. 7.]
- “The first printed Bengali alphabet appeared in a work of the Jesuit Fathers, Jean de Fontenay, Guy Tachard, Etienne Noel, and Claude de Beze. Bearing the title *Observations physiques et mathematiques pour servir à l’histoire naturelle ...*, it was published at Paris in 1692. A second Bengali alphabet was included in a Latin work written by Georg Jacob Kehr, *Aurenk Szeb*, printed at Leipzig in 1725. This displayed the Bengali numerals from 1 to 11, as well as the Bengali consonants and a Bengali transliteration of the German name, Sergeant Wolfgang Meyer. These characters were copied by Johann Friedrich Fritz in his *Orientalischer und occidentalischer Sprachmeister*, printed in Leipzig in 1748. A Hindustani grammar, by Johannes Joshua Ketelaer appeared in *Miscellane Oriental*, published at Leyden [*sic.*] in 1743. This reproduced almost the whole Bengali alphabet, calling it *alphabetum grammaticum*, including both consonants and vowels.”

[M. Siddiq Khan, ‘The Early History of Bengali Printing’. *The Library Quarterly*, 32(1), Jan. 1962: 51–61, p. 51.]

## 5. The polycolonial initiation of Bengal into print culture

- The first attempt to develop a Bengali movable typeface in Bengal was in 1766–1768 by the ‘German’ William Bolts, then with the Dutch and English East India Companies, and later with the Austrian Companies, who also attempted to start the first newspaper in Bengal as early as 1768.
- The first three presses actually set up in Bengal were all in 1777—one in Dutch Hooghly-Chinsurah by John Andrews, and the other two in English Calcutta by James Augustus Hicky, and by the Swedish missionary Johann Zacharias Kiernander, respectively.
- The first book printed in Bengal to contain the Bengali script was the 1777 translation of *The Code of Gentoo Laws* by Nathaniel Halhed published from the Hooghly press, which contained a plate each of Bengali and Devanagari characters. The second was Hicky’s December 1777, almanac, *Calendar for the year of our Lord MDCCLXXVIII. Calculated to the Meridian of Calcutta*, which contained on most pages printed material in the Persian and Bengali scripts, but Kiernander accused Hicky’s *Calendar* to be plagiarised from his idea, and he brought out his own *Calendar* from his press the same year. All these were printed with plates and not movable types.
- Halhed’s *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778) printed from the Hooghly press, was the first to print Bengali letters using movable typefaces developed by Charles Wilkins and his associate Panchanan Karmakar, but it used little Bengali script only for illustrative purposes.
- The first fully Bengali tract printed in the Bengali script from Bengal was the 1784 translation of the *Impey Code* by Jonathan Duncan, published by the Honourable Company’s Press, popularly known as the Company Press, which was started in Malda in 1780 and moved to Calcutta in 1784, which also used typefaces forged by Wilkins and Karmakar in their foundry in Dutch territory.
- The earliest press in Calcutta to print regularly in Bengali but with typefaces not forged in the Chinsurah foundry was the Chronicle Press founded in 1786, but its architect Aaron Upjohn was probably a Portuguese, originally named Anthony de Souza (Chaudhuri, 8).
- The first fully Bengali press was started in Calcutta by the Russian Gerasim Lebedev in the 1790s.



## 5. The polycolonial initiation of Bengal into print culture

- The first full-fledged longstanding Bengali (and other vernaculars) press was the Mission Press founded in Danish Serampore in 1800 by William Carey, which from its demi-colonial location in the polycolony ushered in a true print revolution in the whole of South Asia.
- The British administration having banned proselytisation and missionary activities within its territories, missionaries had to go to the city of refuge offered by the Danish demi-colony of Serampore, and print activities took off on an unprecedented scale from there.
- With the collaboration of Panchanan Karmakar, who moved from Dutch Chinsurah–Hooghly to Danish Serampore, William Carey established the first prolific press in Bengal—the Serampore Mission Press—and printed in August 1800, the first book-length work in Bengali prose in the Bengali script published from Bengal, *Mathew Rachita Mission Samachar*, a translation of the Gospel of Mathew published as *Mangal Samachar*, attributed to Ramram Basu and John Thomas, followed by a translation of the whole of the New Testament in Bengali in February 1801.
- The Mission Press in Serampore did not restrict itself to Christian religious texts alone. Bengali translations from Sanskrit of *Hitopadesh* (1804) and the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (1806) among other texts, as also *Itihasmala*, a series on Indian history beginning with Ramram Basu's *Pratapaditya Charit* (1821, the first book by a Bengali printed in the Bengali script), followed.
- It also started bringing out the first Bengali monthly magazine *Digdarshan* from April 1818, and from 23 May 1818, the first Bengali newspaper, the weekly *Samachar Darpan*.
- The Serampore Press also started publishing a huge number of school textbooks and educational materials in Bengali on subjects ranging from chemistry to physics to biology to geography, in association with the Calcutta School Book Society founded in 1817, and it brought out its own educational books too, like John Clark Marshman's *Jyotiṣa o Golodhyāya* (1819) on astronomy, William Yates' *Padārtha Vidyāsāra* (1825) on physics, and John Mack's *Kimiyā Vidyāsāra* (1834) on chemistry, and serialised publications like Felix Carey's *Vidyāhāravalī* (1834 onwards), a series on science in general but mostly on medical sciences.

## 6. The polycolonial introduction of progressive social and political reforms

- The more fluid caste-class-gender matrix in French Chandernagore allowed for social reforms to be brought in it before British Bengal:

“As early as 1789, the French governor of Chandernagore abolished slave trade in his territory, while in Calcutta slaves continued to be openly bought and sold even till the 1830s. It was as late as 1843 that the Anti-Slavery Act was enacted to stop the practice [in English-governed Bengal]. The last instance of ‘sati-daha’ (self-immolation of widows on their husbands’ burning pyre) in Chandernagore was reported in 1808, while in Calcutta or English-governed Bengal it continued till 1829 when it was officially banned.”

[Sumanta Banerjee, *A Tale of Two Cities under Colonial Rule: Chandernagore and Calcutta*. IIC Occasional Publication 39, New Delhi: India International Centre, 27 April 2012, p. 4.]

- The citizens of French Chandernagore also enjoyed political rights, where, unlike anywhere in colonial British India, the residents, from after the French Revolution, had a constitution, the 1791 Provisional Constitution of Chandernagore, and democratic electoral powers to choose their own representatives, as a Municipality was created in Chandernagore on 1 August 1880 with elected representatives, thus ensuring some sort of self-rule for the citizens of Chandernagore, much before similar developments in British India.

## 7. The polycolonial rise of revolutionary and decolonizing consciousness

- The French Chandernagore already demonstrated the rise of revolutionary and decolonising consciousness from as early as the times of the French Revolution.
- Inspired by the Revolution in France, a Revolutionary Committee was set up in Chandernagore too in 1789, which drove away the official French governor, Montigny, and set up a government of its own, with its own constitution, practically independent of Paris, and absolutely independent of the French colonies of Pondicherry and Isle of France (Mauritius), under whose control the administration of Chandernagore originally fell.
- The free 'revolutionary' government administered the colony independent of the official French government till 11 June 1793, when the English captured Chandernagore, and handed it over to the official French regime in 1802, through the Treaty of Amiens.
- [One can also note Zamor (1762–1820), a Bengali from Chittagong, enslaved and brought to France in 1773, who played a major role in the French Revolution in 1792-1793.]
- From this originary moment of revolution and decolonisation, Chandernagore was not a town that merely symbolised defiance but one that was an actual site of subversion too. Many major freedom fighters within British India, hounded by the police in their own colony, would seek refuge to French Chandernagore, like Aurobindo, who initially took refuge in Chandernagore, from some time in February to 31 March 1910, before fleeing to the more distant French colony of Pondicherry.
- Chandernagore also had its own home-grown anti-British revolutionaries like Kanailal Datta, Motilal Roy, and Rash Behari Bose (who was educated at Dupleix College, Chandernagore)
- Interestingly, all these revolutionaries, based in Chandernagore, would fight against the British colonialists (someone else's problem), but not against their own colonizers. Why?

## 7. The polycolonial rise of revolutionary and decolonizing consciousness

- The polycolonial inculcation of revolutionary and decolonizing consciousness in Bengal was not restricted to the French alone, but the Greeks too, who had their own country colonised by the Turks.
- In the heady years of the early 19th century of freedom struggle in Greece, leading to its eventual independence from the Ottomans in 1832, Calcutta became a potent site of this resistance.
- When the Greek revolutionary network, Society of the Friends (Φιλική Εταιρεία), asked for assistance from the Greek communities abroad, the Calcutta Greeks congregated on the second day of Easter in the year 1802, and vowed to contribute to the struggle.
- The prosperous Greek community of Bengal continuously provided support to the Greek revolution, thereafter constantly contributed significant capital to the authorities of the newly-formed Greek state, and almost a century later also supported the 1916 struggle for the liberation of the Greeks in Northern Epirus in today's Albania, and the refugees escaping the 1922 persecution of Asia Minor Greeks by the Turkish regime under Ataturk.
- This Greek decolonizing activism in turn contributed to rise in fervour in Bengali decolonizing consciousness and activism too.

# In Conclusion

- This history of polycoloniality in Bengal can possibly provide for a template for renegotiating postcolonialist commonsense and our understanding of decolonization in general
- Such renegotiation can provide for an accommodation of differences and pluralities within the apparently diverse colonial experiences in different parts of the colonized world, and expose the entangled histories of multinational imperialism that we share
- Such polycolonial dialogues can facilitate much needed solidarities beyond insular national monisms, and the constraints of apparently linguistically and nationally specific cultural histories
- Such solidarities can, in turn, provide literary and cultural practitioners and pedagogues the theoretical vocabulary and activist ammunition to counter the new-imperialistic and new-fascistic tendencies that plague today's world.

THANK YOU