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by

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A new discourse on freedom developed in West Bengal and Bangladesh from the 1950s to the 1980s, becoming a foundation for what is today termed “postcolonial theory”. In the context of the fall of the British empire and the replication of colonial logics within new postcolonial states, a loosely interconnected group of Calcutta- and Dhaka-based intellectuals reckoned with the meaning of freedom and developed new postcolonial epistemologies. In an epochal shift from early twentieth century forms of anti-colonial nationalism to late twentieth century forms of post-colonial critique, a decolonization cohort of Bengali thinkers turned simultaneously to both local sources of understanding, and to international communities of thought in their struggle for a new mode of imagination. This postcolonial imagination was marked especially by conceptual irreverence and by the desire to redistribute the production of knowledge outside the strictures that had been sent by imperial rule. Their conceptual irreverence meant they were willing to break with their old Marxist and nationalist teachers, even as they remained heavily influenced by them.

For Banglaphone intellectuals in the mid-twentieth century, conceptual irreverence meant they were willing to break with their old Marxist and culturalist teachers, even as they remained heavily influenced by those teachers as well as a longer tradition of cultural critique.

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1 These Bengali intellectuals were by no means the only cohort to interrogate the intellectual reservoir of the Western world, as during this period thinkers as diverse as Aníbal Quijano, José Carlos Mariategui, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Walter Mignolo in Latin American contexts; Ali Shariati, Ilyas Murqus, Sayyid Qutb, and Sayyid ‘Uways in Middle Eastern contexts; and Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, and Ngugi Wa’Thiongo in African and African diasporic contexts were all grappling with the inheritances of humanist and social science disciplines and the simultaneous engagement with local knowledge systems in reshaping the world out of the embers of empire. This essay points to the social history underneath the South Asian intellectual world given its wide range and iterability and in order to enable comparative future work in other regions.
embedded in colonial institutions. Meanwhile, their pursuit of a postcolonial redistribution of the imagination entailed finding new teachers, cohorts and colleagues, both near and far. The transition from early twentieth century forms of anticolonial critique, to new forms of postcolonial critique from the 1950s-1980s is best conceived as an epistemological revolution, a radical redefinition of the very terms for knowing the world that both resisted and compensated for the mimetic return of political, economic and social domination in South Asian postcolonial nation-states. As early twentieth century colonial logics came to be doubled within the mid twentieth century postcolonial nation-state, postcolonial critique sought to interrupt this disheartening recursion through projects to develop irreverent new habits of mind. To be able to think differently about objects of analysis, and to define the knowing subject differently – to imagine differently -- became central components of what freedom meant in the context of the rising nation-state authoritarianism, whether in 1970s India or for much of Pakistan’s history.2

As a contribution to social and cultural theory in the late twentieth century, postcolonialism has been pioneered to a great extent by intellectuals grounded in the particularities of South Asian intellectual and political life, and within South Asia, the even more particular conditions of colonial and post-colonial West Bengal (India) and East Bengal (East Pakistan, 1947 – 71 and Bangladesh, 1971 – present). Yet, a historical understanding of postcolonial intellectuals in the period of decolonization, grounded by their own biographical, socio-cultural, linguistic, and political contexts, as well as by their writings, has yet to emerge within the discipline of history writing.3 Although the individual writings of postcolonial

3 Kohn and McBride, Political Theories of Decolonization: The Problem of Foundations (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) is a notable exception but only broadly surveys many
intellectuals, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and many others, may be quite familiar to historians, the history behind such thought is rarely queried. Indeed, intellectuals across the global South, from Africa to South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, occupy an uneasy ground within the field of intellectual history. Thinkers such as Amartya Sen, Ranajit Guha and Tapan Raychaudhuri, and many others, are generally studied as theorists or critics. Against the grain of much literary and cultural criticism, this analysis situates these South Asian theorists and critics as historical actors.4

Vivek Chibber, in a recent polemic against the theoretical contributions of Subaltern Studies, for example, reiterates the increasingly commonplace dismissal of “postcolonial theory [as] a diffuse and nebulous body of thought.” Chibber expresses a relatively widespread perception that postcolonial critique has sequestered itself in the domain of literary theory, and thereby relinquished any “real value for social analysis” by celebrating cultural fragments as opposed to interrogating global, and structural historical patterns.5 While valuable in certain respects, Chibber’s argument loses sight of the historical nature of postcolonial thought. His critique takes a decontextualized “snapshot” of postcolonial theory instead of considering its much longer history. He thus separates the rise of a particular kind of Calcutta-based

4 One of the last systematic studies of the topic, Edward Shils, The Intellectual Between Tradition and Modernity: The Indian Situation (The Hague: Mouton, 1961) was written at the moment of decolonization and reflects primarily on the colonial modernity of the Indian intelligentsia. Our research places the intellectual developments of decolonization after this moment into a twentieth century history, reflective of the 1971 creation of Bangladesh.

postcolonial theory from its social contexts and main struggles as well as its historical relationship to a broader, Banglaphone history that is not easily subsumed in the term “postcolonial.” “Postcolonial theory,” in his analysis, becomes an abstract set of claims about the need to “provincialize Europe” and salvage colonial difference. Such a move evacuates the debates, practices and conditions that give social theories their very meaning. Edward Said once cautioned us not to study intellectuals “in a sort of universal space, bound neither by national boundaries nor by ethnic identity”, as this surely would eradicate any ability to attend to the specificity of intellectual life as it emerged in the “dark places of the earth.”

In European and European-American contexts, many scholars have approached monumental moments in modernity from the vantage point of prosopographic intellectual history. Two important examples are Martin Jay’s classic 1973 The Dialectical Imagination: A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950, and Tony Judt’s 1992 Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956. Intellectual historians studying schools, cohorts or generations of literary and cultural producers in the twentieth century, have examined the intellectual upheavals of the West in terms of the genocide of the Jews of Europe, the degradations of Soviet Communism, the crises of the Left. Yet, the discipline of intellectual history seems to make little space today to ask pertinent and comparative questions about the key

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features of schools, cohorts and generations of cultural producers writing from colonial and postcolonial vantage points, in non-European languages, during the same period.

Martin Jay framed the rise of Western Marxism and the emergence of Critical Theory within the social context of a group of scholars initially gathered at the Institute for Social Research, and eponymously known as the “Frankfurt School”. His seminal book was a social and intellectual study of the genesis of Western Marxist thought, marked by the insistence on “negation, negativity… and not [joining] in.”^8^ Tony Judt, like Jay, also framed his masterful study of a cohort of postwar French intellectuals, 1944-1956, in terms of the crisis of Marxism, and the “moral dilemma” of Marxism in the face of post-war Stalinism.\(^9\) Judt was interested in the specific social forces, interpersonal relations, and historical contexts that made it possible for French intellectuals to champion philosophical Marxism despite the excesses of Stalinism in the decade after WWII. The cohort Judt studied is presented as grappling with a crisis of postwar Western society, and as teetering between exhaustion and optimism. For Jay and Judt, there can be no proper understanding of the Frankfurt School, or of the French Left, without history and social context. These histories in turn speak to the broader condition of the twentieth century through recurrent reliance on both empirical and conceptual explorations of Europocentric (in space) and Eurocentric (in orientation) events like the Holocaust, the World Wars, the careers of Marxism in the Western world, and the rise of a globalized capitalist and nation-state system. In the last generation, scholars from Middle Eastern and African diasporic fields have begun to chart out paths toward a potential intellectual history of the twentieth century through colonial and postcolonial vantage points. In the Middle Eastern historical field, Yoav Di-Capua and

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^8^ Jay, *Past imperfect*, 291

^9^ Judt, *Past imperfect*, 2
Omnia El-Shakry have examined the sources of social sciences and disciplines in colonial and post-colonial Egypt.\textsuperscript{10} Gary Wilder in his recent book on African and Antillean intellectuals in the midst of French decolonization, 1950-1970, presents them as a cohort struggling for new conceptions of “time” and “freedom” beyond the nation-state. Meanwhile Lawrence Jackson provides us with a “synthetic social movement history” of African American cultural production during the rise of mid-century American “racial liberalism”, 1934-1960. Jackson traces an arc from Black modernist integrationism to the rise of realist protest literature, and from the heyday of liberal optimism to the dawn of Black Power. Wilder and Jackson show how we can understand the intellectual history of the colonial and colored worlds by seeking to put fragments together into a whole that speaks not only to locality but to the broader twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11}

Inspired by these recent intellectual histories of decolonization, this essay analyzes the life histories of West Bengali and Bangladeshi intellectuals as a lens into the intellectual history of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{12} As a member of a team\textsuperscript{13} funded by a NEH collaborative research grant, I contributed to the recording of sixty oral histories with leading West Bengali and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Collaborators include Kris Manjapra of Tufts University and Iftekhar Iqbal of the University of Brunei Darussalam.
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Bangladeshi intellectuals who made contributions to the emergence of postcolonial culture and thought. Interviews have been digitally encoded, curated, and publically available, with the links to online segments of the interviews included in the footnotes to this article.\textsuperscript{14} A sophisticated historiography on oral histories discusses how such texts are never merely exercises in individual recollection, but also are performances of collective memory. Oral histories, as social productions, show how recollections of individual life-experiences are always interpellated by the politics of group belonging. And the very modes of oral recollection, including storytelling, recounting, attesting, memorializing, but also repeating, revising, and digressing, are not approximations of “hard facts”, but are themselves semiotic practices, characterized both by the politics of description, deferral, and erasure.\textsuperscript{15} Collections of oral histories must thus be read broadly as they constitute an archive of documents for the intellectual historian, and not only a reservoir of objective data. Oral histories are often characterized by storytelling and by the qualities of the voice. They can also be very intimate documents, saturated with affect. To collect and curate these affective social texts has become an important element in the project of “public history”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Interviews have been uploaded in a searchable database available here: https://corpora.tufts.edu/?f%5Bcorpora_collection_sim%5D%5B%5D=Bengali+Intellectuals+Oral+History+Project.


With the aim of grasping the intellectual life of postcolonial Bengal as a whole, instead of in fragments, we used digital humanities tools to visualize social connections across the oral history archive, and to uncover submerged patterns amongst those connections. We encoded the oral history texts and used network analysis software (Cytoscape) to depict the intense level of interconnection amongst an intergenerational group of persons who participated in the transformation of cultural and intellectual life in Bengal and Bangladesh from the 1950s to 1980s (see figure 1, and explore online at <tufts.corpora.edu>). In figure 2, the blue nodes represent the interviewees who contributed to the oral history archive (see appendix for full list), and the lines show all the references made to people across the whole archive. We note that the decolonizing cohort from West Bengal and Bangladesh, despite the splits of partition and the erection of nation-state divides, were an interconnected group because of the schools they attended, the friends and mentors they had in common, and the recollections they shared. Such visualization allows us to see which interviewees seem to be most central in the recollections of persons from the decolonizing cohort we interviewed. We note that figures such as Amartya Sen, Tapan Raychaudhuri, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, among others, were most frequently referenced by within the constellation. Meanwhile, figure 3 shows the persons with the highest degree of “betweenness”; that is, the persons who play the most important role in binding the constellation together. This analysis reveals senior members of the cohort, such as the economist Amartya Sen and historian Barun De, as key touchstones for the group identity of postcolonial Bengali thinkers. In addition, iconic figures such as the cultural paragon, Rabindranath Tagore, and the famed Marxist historian, Sushobhan Sarkar, show up as the most important inspirations, teachers and role models for this cohort of intellectuals who came of age in the decades from the 1940s to the 1980s.
Figure 1

The constellation of interconnection among West Bengali and Bangladeshi postcolonial intellectuals, 1950s-1960s
Figure 2

Largest nodes depict interviewees with the “Average Shortest Path Length” to any other person in the network.

This is a measure of the interviewees who were most commonly referenced by other interviewees.
Figure 3

Largest nodes depict persons with highest “Betweenness Centrality.”

These persons bind the network together with the most interconnections.

As stated earlier, the purpose of such digital humanities analysis is not to uncover positivistic data through computational analysis, but rather to draw our attention to the prosopographic coherence of a group of thinkers. In the context of the contemporary fragmenting study of postcolonial thought, the digital humanities provides a propaedeutic for an intellectual history focused on grasping a field of thinkers as a whole constellation, and not as a mere series of isolated scribes.

In West Bengal, and in diaspora, internationally influential Calcutta-based postcolonial theorists – Ranajit Guha, Amartya Sen, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Partha Chatter, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and others – emerged at the intersection of specific political and social contexts and transnational educational spaces. Yet, in East Pakistan/Bangladesh, a different mode of
postcolonial thought was developing, strongly defined by the state structure of Pakistan. East Pakistani/Bangladeshi thinkers, facing the legacies of systematic infrastructural and economic underdevelopment imposed by the legacies of nineteenth-century British imperial political economy, by long-standing Bengali Hindu high-caste and communitarian domination, and eventually by West Pakistani authoritarianism, were faced with the imperatives of developing new modes of social praxis.

Anticolonial radicalism of the early to mid twentieth century was characterized by the struggle for freedom from British rule, and it operated on two distinct but related levels: on the level of political economic critique, and on the level of cultural critique. In Bengal, the political economic dimension of anticolonial struggle was articulated mainly in terms of Marxism, while the cultural dimension was expressed through various forms of vernacular cosmopolitanism, led especially by the *Brahma Samaj*, and the *Buddhir Mukhta Andolon*.

The *Brahma Samaj*, begun in Calcutta by the polyglot intellectual and critic Rammohan Roy in the late 1820s, initiated a long tradition of questioning received truths about religion, caste, community, and ritual obligations in Indian society. Since this late Company moment, generations of Bengali intellectuals were either educated in schools started by the organization, taught by teachers associated with it, or were members of the organization, like the legendary Tagore family, the scientist Jagdish Chandra Bose, the statistician P.C. Mahalanobis, and the influential historian Susobhan Sarkar. Nearly a century later in Dhaka, the now capital of Bangladesh, the *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* (Movement for the Emancipation of the Intellect) began amongst teachers and students in the newly formed Dhaka University to debate and explore the meanings and potentials of Islam in late colonial Bengal. As many of the Dhaka-based intellectuals held family members who studied and/or taught in *Brahma* schools, the connected
and vibrant world of religious reform in colonial Bengal provided a foundation for intellectual development in the post-colonial era. Both of these institutions touched the vast majority of intellectuals raised in late colonial and early post-World War II Bengal, and informed all of the interviewees interviewed for this project.

By the mid-twentieth century in Bengal, in the time of Lenin, Trotsky and Mao, the political economic dimension of anticolonial struggle was articulated mainly in terms of Marxism. In the leftist little magazines movement of the 1920s to 1940s, in whose pages much of Bengali Marxism was delineated, poets, writers and academics developed a distinctive style of Marxist critique, heavily Marxist-Leninist in its political tone, but also highly literary and oriented towards cultural and artistic critique. Magazines such as Parichaya and Kabita promoted the Bengali language, and what Barun De once called the “intellectual vernacularisation of internationally progressive ideas”.  

But in the context of new postcolonial states, the impulses of anticolonial radicalism were necessarily transformed. Especially as postcolonial statecraft showed itself to replicate forms of colonial domination and authority, young generations of thinkers were forced to reinvent the meaning of criticism afresh. This new form of critique exhibited a conceptual irreverence vis-à-vis earlier modes of Marxist and vernacular-cosmopolitan anticolonial critique. Bengali postcolonial critique also showed a volatile interest in finding footholds for a new imagination both in local and communitarian realms, and in the distant and international domain. At the genesis of postcolonial critique, a young generation of postcolonial scholars insisted that the

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irreverent pursuit of new habits of mind was the best way to break the recursive habits of authoritarianism and domination that came to characterize postcolonial statecraft and society.

Pranab Bardhan’s conceptual irreverence was characterized by a turn from the strictures of quantitative economic analysis alone, to the anthropological study of Indian economic life. As with many of our interviewees, Bardhan, an economist based at Berkeley, was born in Calcutta in 1939, but his parents migrated from East Bengal before the 1947 partition. He vividly remembers the war and the famine of 1943 and 1944, the communal violence that broke out in 1946, and the relief work done in and around his home. When he entered Presidency College, he made visits to the British Council Library, where he received an initiation into Anglophone politics and literature, reading Encounter magazine and “gobbling up everything in the latest issue of the New Statesman.” He recounts his initiation into academic life at the College Street coffeehouse, an institution near Presidency College, Calcutta University, where he would engage in spirited debate, or adda, about politics, culture, art, aesthetics and many other topics. His mentors included the economists, Amlan Datta and Sibnarayan Ray, both of whom we also interviewed for this project. Datta and Ray were two of the closest young associates of M.N. Roy, the leading countercultural Marxist thinker of the day. Bardhan remembers fierce and spirited debates between Datta and Roy, on one hand, and the mainstream Marxists, on the other, that shaped his early education. He also recalls discussions with Sachin Choudhury, editor of what is now the Economic and Political Weekly (a major Indian English language periodical). Bardhan’s course of study in college focused on literature, classical Sanskrit and also modern

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18 Pranab Bardhan was born in 1939.
19 Interview with Pranab Bardhan, October 13, 2010, University of California, Berkeley, 22:44.
20 For an intellectual biography of M.N. Roy, see Kris Manjapra, M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism (Delhi: Routledge, 2010).
Bengali, but also drew on history and economics. He went on to complete his PhD at Cambridge in 1966, and then returned to India to work in Delhi at Indian Statistical Institute, followed by the newly formed Delhi School of Economics. This circuit of advanced education abroad followed by return to India in order to teach in newly established research institutes forms a pattern among many members of this decolonizing generation.

By the 1970s, social science research on Indian postcolonial society led young intellectuals to challenge and upend many of the established paradigms of study, and to turn against the prevailing technocratic approaches of state developmentalism. In many ways, intellectuals from both West Bengal and Bangladesh embarked on intellectual and political revolts against the state, and against the status quo. Pranab Bardhan, for example, found that doing the sort of economics he was trained to do – measuring change quantitatively – was inadequate for understanding social realities in the postcolonial age. This led him to author and co-author numerous interdisciplinary works connecting economics and anthropology.

“Fortunately I got to know a famous Bengali intellectual, Ashok Rudra…And while doing my village surveys [with Ashok Rudra], I became an anthropologist. [I] came and talked to people. People are not just thinking economics, but also many other things. So I began to think about the kinds of methods that economists use and anthropologists use.”

In a critical period, during the Emergency of 1975-77, when Indira Gandhi’s government suspended the constitution and imposed emergency rule, he left for Berkeley, in an all-out protest of the Indian state.

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21 Interview with Pranab Bardhan, 1:15; See the shift between his early work, such as “External Economies, Economic Development, and the Theory of Protection”, *Oxford Economic Papers* 16:1 (1964), 40-54 and his mid-career work, such as “Types of Labour Attachment in Agriculture: Results of a Survey in West Bengal, 1979), *Economic and Political Weekly* 15 (1980), 1477-1484.

went on to teach development economics and social thought at the University of California, and devoted himself especially to studying agrarian labor conditions in the context of modern globalization. As an economist, he increasingly critiqued systematic disciplinary knowledge from an anthropological perspective.

Partha Chatterjee, anthropologist and historian at Columbia University and the Calcutta Center for Social Sciences, would complete a similar circuit, although his advanced degree came from the University of Rochester. “I returned to Calcutta in 1973, and the CSSS had just been formed (Center for the Study of Social Sciences). It was formed as a network of institutions under the Indian Council of Research... Looking back I know this was broadly speaking part of the Indira Gandhi phase of a broad-based, populist development program, in which there would be a place for Indian academic institutions which would play a more active, interventionist role in development planning...,” Chatterjee reflected.23

While still a student at Presidency College, Chatterjee came to know Sushoban Sarkar, the famous Marxist historian and interpreter of Gramsci. Sarkar was, in fact, the first to write a comprehensive account of Gramsci’s thought in India.24 Gramsci’s thought represented a critique of the base/superstructure divide in classical Marxism. And Gramscian Marxism, in Sarkar’s rendering, involved not only material struggle, but also a struggle of representation to create new “common sense”. For Gramsci, as for Sarkar, intellectuals did serve as a class in themselves, but were “organic” spokespersons for political groups. This Gramscianism of the

23 Interview with Partha Chatterjee, September 15, 2012, 58:40. We see the context of state authoritarian filtering through Chatterjee’s, “Bengal: Rise and Growth of a Nationality”, Social Scientist 4:1 (1975), 67-82, in which he launches his first critique of “bourgeois nationalism”

Sumit Sarkar circle greatly inspired a young generation who were on their way to becoming conceptual rebels.

Chatterjee was shaped by the destabilization of knowledge that took place during the first decades of India’s post-colonial period. Born nine years after Bardhan, on August 5th, 1947, and ten days before independence, Chatterjee’s initial point of entry into academia was politics in college. In a manner similar to Bardhan and resonant with many of his generation, including figures such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Chatterjee recalls the deep hostility between Communists and Anti-Communists, between supporters of the postcolonial state and violent opponents to it, that permeated intellectual life in the 1960s and 1970s.

Partha Chatterjee turned away from studying the politics of urban centers and of state actors, to exploring the political strategies and activities of the countryside. For his doctoral research, Chatterjee specialized in rational choice and game theory. He taught for a year in the Punjab, and then at the Center of Social Sciences in Calcutta, which was just formed in the early 1970s as a part of the Indian Council for Social Science Research. A major influence on him in those years was the economic historian, Asok Sen, who had earlier been an associate of the Communist Party of India, but who had become critical of it. Asok Sen inspired Chatterjee in his work on agrarian history. “I found mentors well after my PhD…,” Chatterjee said about the reboot of his intellectual trajectory that began only after he returned to Calcutta after his doctoral studies abroad.25

The social historian, Hitesranjan Sanyal, had a decisive influence on Chatterjee. After returning to Calcutta in 1972, Chatterjee worked under the tutelage of Sanyal on a major project to reconstruct the Congress movement in rural areas of Bengal through oral history sources. “Hritesh Sanyal was a very strongly Gandhi-inspired person. I became his collaborator in his project to construct, largely through oral history, the Congress movements in the 1920s, ‘30s’ and ‘40’s in rural areas of Bengal… one of the most intense learning experiences of my life was precisely in these years.” In the period from 1974-1979, he traveled extensively in districts of southern Bengal, Hooghly, Bankura, and Purulia, visiting numerous villages. He recalls speaking to more than a thousand people, and this helped him recognize a whole realm of effective political communication outside the domain of the textual, and beyond the official archive of the state.

Chatterjee struggled to understand the politics of community and to rescue it from the political-scientific epithet of “communalism.” He developed a creative understanding of Gramscian Marxism focused on the role of ideology in social domination, which would soon resonate strongly with the thought of Ranajit Guha, and he situated the modern postcolonial state at the focal point of social contradictions. The postcolonial state was not an end-goal, for Chatterjee, but a social and historical problem. Chatterjee’s work reinterpreted the history of community and religion, drawing on the legacies of Marxism and vernacular cosmopolitanism. His irreverent work critiqued dominant modes of thought including liberal Eurocentrism, the

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27 Interview with Partha Chatterjee, 1:03:00.
emancipatory claims of bourgeois Indian nationalism, and the conventions of the social sciences in the 1960s and 70s.

During the period from 1967 to 1977, the hold of the Congress Party in Bengal eroded and collapsed. But during this same period, at the political center in Delhi, Congress power under Indira Gandhi took on a new authoritarian and dictatorial form. In 1977, after the suspension of the constitution, 200 West Bengali artists, intellectuals and teachers were signatories to “Demands for the Restoration of Democratic Norms” and the release of political prisoners, and opposition leaders in Delhi, such as Jayprakash Narayan were organizing political resistance in the context of police crackdowns. By the 1970s, the image of colonialism had doubled. It took the historical form of British colonial power, ending in 1947. But it also took on the specter of the current regional and state government, and of the regime of the postcolonial nation-state more generally. The rise of Indira Gandhi’s authoritarianism, especially in the context of the rampant use of special police forces in the years from 1969-77, represented for many in India the ascent of a neo-colonial form of the developmentalist state, in which the postcolonial nation-state came to double and reinstitute the anti-democratic authoritarianism of European colonial rule from the previous era. As Partha Chatterjee reflected:

Much of my concern with agrarian politics and the critical study of nationalism was, in fact, prompted to a large extend by a general sense of unrest in the period of the 1970s. This was the period of the Emergency (1975-77). The period immediately following the Emergency was particularly creative, because for the first time, it was possible to witness the collapse of what could have been an authoritarian, Third World dictatorship. The Emergency Period was really moving towards something like that. It didn’t happen, and what happened subsequently was very important in shaping political structures, as well as

broader social and intellectual movements in India, and the quality of intellectual life in India, through the 1990s and later on.\textsuperscript{29}

Postcolonial thinkers, then, were not just grappling with their colonial past – in very tangible ways, they were also struggling for an alternative future in the context of authoritarian national consolidation. Historically, the articulations of postcolonial thought have been rooted in the struggle for new habits of mind, under the threat of the return of colonial logics within the postcolonial nation-state itself. Chatterjee concluded his interviews with words echoed in many other interviewees: “there is a way of becoming an engaged intellectual, who takes the purely professional demands of intellectual life completely seriously, and yet can engage in a public intellectual life… I have tried to do both of those things.”\textsuperscript{30}

And while postcolonial critiques of the state and of authoritarian nationalism were sharpened through the turn to the local, vernacular and agrarian, they were simultaneously imbued with a progressive and internationalist decolonizing ethos. For example, in 1954, Cheddi Jagan had just been ousted as leader of British Guyana by British colonial forces. On a trip to India that included a stop in Calcutta, Presidency College students Amiya Bagchi and Jyotirmay Pal Chaudhuri invited Jagan to speak to students.\textsuperscript{31} Both Bagchi and Pal Chaudhuri would soon take their Third Worldism into the heart of global whiteness, as they completed their graduate studies in the British metropole in coming years, at Cambridge and Birmingham, respectively.\textsuperscript{32} By the time

\textsuperscript{29} Interview with Partha Chatterjee, 1:15:00.  
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{31} Interview with Amiya Bagchi, January 11, 2010, Kolkata, India:  
https://corpora.tufts.edu/catalog/tufts:MS165.001.020.00001?timestamp/34:41:  
Interview with Jotirmoy Pal Chaudhuri, January 28, 2009, Kolkata, India:  
\textsuperscript{32} Bagchi studied at Cambridge, and Pal Chaudhury at the University of Birmingham; See Bagchi’s brazen, “The Theory of Efficient Neocolonialism”, \textit{Economic and Political Weekly} 6:30 (1971), 1669-1676
of the tumultuous 1960s, with the decolonization of African countries after the decline of British, Portuguese, and French rule, guerilla warfare flared up across southeast and southwest Africa, in Angola and Mozambique, and converged with the Algerian War and the Vietnam War. Bengali youth celebrated the rumor of Mao’s “great leap forward” after the successful completion of a protracted war led from the countryside. In that period, Mao, Fanon, and Ho Chi Minh inspired youth around the world with the idea of seizing autonomous territory, people’s war, and the need for counter-violence.33

The conceptual irreverence of young intellectuals coming of age in this context was on full display in the page of the Frontier newsmagazine, begun in 1966. Indian radicals were increasingly conceiving of themselves in “Third Worldist” modes, as members of an interconnected postcolonial world. Edited by the poet and activist, Samar Sen, the newsmagazine was a hub of activity for thinkers such as Ranajit Guha and Jyotirmoy Datta, both of whom wrote for it.34

But it was not only the colored internationalism of the decolonizing world that attracted these young thinkers. Another kind of internationalism, channeled through academic institutions of imperial metropoles, worked in combination with it. The importance of Cambridge University and Oxford University in the formation of West Bengali postcolonial thought can hardly be

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overstated. Many among the older members of the cohort, such as Amartya Sen and Amiya Bagchi, or Ashin Datta and Barun De, were trained at Cambridge. Some of these thinkers, such as Bagchi, studied Development Economics and were most strongly drawn to the works of thinkers such as Jan Tinbergen and Gunner Myrdal.  

Cambridge University became a launch pad for Amartya Sen’s conceptual irreverence. He challenged the accepted bounds of Indian economic thought, in which Indians were expected to only write about the economic depredations of colonial India and the “drain of wealth”. Sen, as a major contemporary icon of the vernacular cosmopolitan, found his way out from this bind through a deep engagement with the economic philosophy of Western thinkers. It was the neo-Keynsianism and rational choice theory of Paul Samuelson, Kenneth Arrow and John Hicks that proffered the greater inspiration.  

Sen states, “the general thought was that as an Indian economist, you have to concentrate on poverty. Not for you was the luxury of the analytical universe of Social Choice Theory. That's a completely wrong idea because ultimately Social Choice Theory has a great deal of relevance for development too […], but I didn’t see it that way then [at Presidency College in 1952].”

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If British colonialism aimed to fix Indians in place, the decolonizing era witnessed a volatile celebration of young people out of place, thinking outside the accepted bounds. Often, they used institutions in Britain itself to this very purpose. A great circulating academic diaspora of young talent developed in the late Nehruvian years. By the 1960s and 1970s, young intellectuals were travelling increasingly to the United States for higher education, and U.S. schools began eclipsing the role played by Oxford and Cambridge in earlier decades. For example, Kamal Datta began graduate school in physics at Brandeis University. He decided to venture to the United States for higher studies based on the advice of P.K. Kabir, who had himself completed his studies at Cornell University before returning to teach in Calcutta. Others attended Harvard, Chicago, Columbia and other schools, to complete degrees in the social sciences and humanities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak began her doctoral degree at Cornell in the mid-1960s. In 1964, the young economists, Amartya Sen and Sukhamoy Chakrabarty, were situated at Harvard as researchers and instructors.

Postcolonial critique involved a challenge to the conceptual and spatial assignments imposed by both Marxist critique, and Western liberalism. Institutions in the United States and Australia became sites for young, traveling postcolonial thinkers to mess up the boundaries of the imagination, and to rethink the world, and themselves in new frameworks. The historian Tapan Raychaudhuri, a figure with some of the highest “network centrality” to the Bengali postcolonial cohort, developed his mode of postcolonial critique by thinking thoughts out of place. When at the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard in 1969, Raychaudhuri’s

38 Interview with Kamal Datta, August 20, 2009, Delhi, India: https://corpora.tufts.edu/catalog/tufts:MS165.001.008.00001?timestamp/56:54.
conversations with Theodore Zeldin at Harvard played an important role in his turn away from mainstream economics towards the study of anthropology and psychology.\textsuperscript{40} Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s form of conceptual irreverence played out on the campus of Cornell University. For her, it involved the practice of dis-identification with “Bengaliness” and with Marxist “masculine vanguardism”, and an irreverent identification with radical Black politics.\textsuperscript{41} Thinking back to her attendance at a meeting with visit of Malcolm X to Cornell University in 1967, she says, “I still can’t get over it… it was very rousing… it could speak to a Bengali person because it was really the same kind of wavelength”.\textsuperscript{42} Chakravorty Spivak notes the importance of the Black Power. She remembers an induction into the Black radical culture of the 1960s:

I went to Cornell, and I heard Malcolm X speak with James Brown and Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert, and I sang on the harmonium with Allen Ginsberg and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka). That was his name then. The young men, like Michael Schwerner, went down to Philadelphia. They went down to Philadelphia, Mississippi and got killed…. I mean, when I think that I heard Malcolm X, I still can't get over it… James Brown was much more careful and rational and good, but that was not what we were. Malcolm X was like us and so I remember that as a young person, I thought I was able to move with him. You know what I mean?.\textsuperscript{43}

Just as Chakravorty Spivak was inspired by Black Power, she was also studying with Paul de Man.\textsuperscript{44} The duality of postcolonial internationalism, defined through inclusion in Eurocentric

\textsuperscript{40} Interview with Tapan Raychaudhuri: 
https://corpora.tufts.edu/catalog/tufts:MS165.001.001.00001?timestamp/70:06.

\textsuperscript{41} See Chakravorty Spivak’s formulation of her project to “supplement vanguardism” in “Thre Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, 12:1 (1985), 243-261.

\textsuperscript{42} Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, August 25, 2010, New York, USA:

\textsuperscript{43} Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

\textsuperscript{44} Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:
and Euro-settler institutions, as well as insurgent politics and Third Worldism, produced ways of thinking that involved being within, but also against, the structures of dominant thinking.

Bengali postcolonial thinkers found the category of the nation to be contested, skewed and undone in the very time when independence, sovereignty and the region were being reconfigured and consolidated.\textsuperscript{45} And the Subaltern Studies project, which provides perhaps the most important summation of the cohort’s intellectual biography, flourished in this context. These conditions informed the coalescence of the Subaltern Studies group, culminating with its first publication in 1982. Ranajit Guha, who began the group, was a senior historian and Marxist thinker. He contributed major methodological advances in exploring histories of “the subaltern,” or agrarian non-elites subordinated within regimes of power. Perhaps best known for his landmark essay, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,” as well as his late 1990s book, \textit{Domination without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India}, Guha employed the Gramscian concept of “hegemony,” with deep roots in the teachings of Susobhan Sarkar, to discuss the failures of the colonial and postcolonial state in India.\textsuperscript{46}

Ranajit Guha was born in 1923 to an eastern Bengal landholding family from Barisal (the place Kazi Nazrul Islam called the “Venice of Bengal”), which had lost its lands after partition. Guha’s life history, which he recorded for this project, recounts an upbringing common to many \textit{bhadralok}: a home in the village, a home in Calcutta, and a proximity to village life. His father a

\textsuperscript{45} For an analysis of the contestations surrounding the notion of a Bengali regional consciousness in late colonial India, see Neilesh Bose, \textit{Recasting the Region: Language, Culture, and Islam in Colonial Bengal} (Delhi: Oxford, 2014).

High Court judge, Guha’s family was both part of the jotedari elite with ties to the land, and to the upper echelons in the city. In 1934, at the age of 11, Guha was sent to Calcutta by his family, and only then did he begin formal schooling.

It was at Presidency College in the 1940s where he became heavily involved in leftist campus politics, eventually leading to near expulsion in 1944. “The underground communist student front people contacted me…I realized that the illegal communist party front was taking an interest on the Presidency College…their idea was to form a students’ union…From then on I became more or less involved through various stages, deeply and deeply into politics. I was arrested and for three weeks I was in jail custody. I was interrogated. I went through the whole process.”

Guha remembered Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyaya, the famous author of *Pather Panchali* and *Aparajita*, as heavily involved in cultivating a radical political, anticolonial consciousness among Presidency College students. Guha was a close associate and soon became a Marxist internationalist. After completing his Master’s degree at the University of Calcutta, he travelled to China in 1949 and then on to France, Russia, North Africa and West Asia, and Hungary. Guha eventually accepted a position at the University of Sussex.

Significantly, the time of Guha’s travels coincided with the rise of the authoritarianism of the Indira Gandhi regime in the 1970s, and the anti-democratic Emergency, 1975-77. Guha’s most strident contributions to history come after the attendant failures of the Indian nation-state came

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to full view. At that moment, the promises of a democratic, developmentalist nation-state revealed themselves as cynical ploys by political elites.

In many ways, Guha’s trajectory shared the characteristics of the decolonizing cohort: partition displacement, political radicalization in post-independence Calcutta, and an insistence on conceptual irreverence. The contributions of the Subaltern Studies group in the 1980s therefore are best understood as a palimpsest of social critiques, which themselves came out of the overlapping dimensions of displaced and mobile lived experiences among Bengali postcolonial intellectuals over the previous decades. The critique of capitalist political economy, imperialism, and the colonial and post-colonial tyranny of urban spaces over the countryside, was powerfully combined in their work with a Third Worldist interest in the political, cultural and linguistic sources of people’s sovereignty and identity.⁵⁰

Dipesh Chakrabarty recounts his induction into Subaltern Studies when he traveled to Britain in 1979 to do archival research for his dissertation:

I actually called Ranajit in 1979. And the moment I called, he said, ‘yes, I know of you, and I am very interested in your work. Come to Sussex and spend a weekend with me.’ And that was my first exposure to subaltern studies. Ranajit had already been meeting with Shahid [Amin] and Gyan [Prakash], and the two Davids, David Arnold and David Hardiman. And Hardiman and Arnold did PhDs with Anthony Low at Sussex. And Shahid and Gyan did PhDs with Tapan Raychaudhuri at Oxford. But Ranajit was a kind of guru on the side. Ranajit Guha was 25 years older, but intellectually the youngest, the most youthful… a very youthful intellect…. He had in mind to induct me into subaltern studies. So he read out to me what we used to call, the Manifesto, and got my assent to it…. By then, Shahid and Gyan, and the two Davids, and Ranajit-da were already talking about publishing a series. They were not sure of what to call it, until it was Ranajit’s brainwave to all it Subaltern Studies, from Gramsci. They were thinking of “History from Below” or this or that, but I think it was a stroke of genius to call it Subaltern Studies, which I think was a stroke of genius, since it did not reproduced a name. Ranajit said, “Let’s call it Subaltern Studies” And he read out to me part of “Elementary Aspects”, and

I found it revolutionary and eye-opening. It was a very intense two days in Sussex, but I came back a convert. And very excited. And he was going to come to Calcutta on his way to Australia. I would be there already. So I took the message of Subaltern Studies to Gautam Badra and Partha Chatterjee. And when Ranajit-da came to the city, he met with them, and inducted the three of us into the project.51

That rejection that Chakrabarty remembered from the Naxalites on Presidency College campus seemed to be neutralized and rectified by the ritual of inclusion within this new band of insurgents. The affection and acceptance that had been withheld among an earlier group of young revolutionary men was compensated for through this new union.

Partha Chatterjee defined the Subaltern Studies project in the inaugural edition, in the essay, “Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35”, and elaborated on it in “More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry,” republished in Selected Subaltern Studies.52 In these two works, Chatterjee asserted the existence of an autonomous space of ideological formation and cultural solidarity among agrarian populations. After extensive reviews of Marxist theory, anthropology, and European medieval history, Chatterjee endeavored to show how communitarian affiliations were elastic and historical. As he stated in our interview, in the years after independence, in the time of Nehruvian consolidation, community was seen by most accounts as a non-entity, or an entity to be feared or eradicated. Chatterjee’s project articulated freedom’s anchorages in community, culture and language, and social difference, in ways that escape mimetic Marxist analysis.53

51 Interview with Dipesh Chakrabarty, 47:21.
In East Pakistan/Bangladesh, a different mode of postcolonial thought was developing, strongly defined by the state structure of Pakistan. Bangladeshi thinkers, facing the legacies of systematic infrastructural and economic underdevelopment imposed by the legacies of nineteenth-century British imperial political economy, by long-standing Bengali Hindu high-caste domination, and by West Pakistani authoritarianism, were faced with the imperatives of developing irreverent modes of social praxis.

The devastation of the 1971 war and subsequent struggles for state stability in the 1970s, including the prolonged famine of 1974, gave new inspiration to an intellectual life of praxis in Bangladesh. The divergences in the intellectual landscape between, say, Kolkata and Dhaka, are as important as their interconnections and similarities. The emotionally charged marriage between East Bengal and Pakistan at decolonization proved stormy from the outset. The resistance in the early 1950s against the West Pakistani establishment, which was largely populated by elite migrants from northern India and which attempted to impose Urdu as the state language on Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis, propelled a national movement for democratic governance. In the 1960s anti-military resistance became a predominant political feature, inspired by pro-Soviet and pro-China versions of socialism, and by the model of social democracy. In both cases, a future of political freedom for subaltern populations in East Pakistan was the main objective.

Hameeda Hossain, born in 1936 in Indian Hyderabad, was of the same generation as Ranajit Guha. Sent to Pakistan as a young girl in the late 1940s, her education followed a different initial track, as she was educated in what was then West Pakistan and then sent to the United States to study at Wellesley College in the mid-1950s. Though she does not descend from Bengali-speakers, her life was intertwined with Bengal. The early years of Pakistan, in the 1950s
and early 1960s, were a time when the boundaries of ethnicity and language were often fluidly
crossed, resulting in many unions and marriages between Bengali and non-Bengali Pakistanis. A
cosmopolitan sense of Pakistaniyaat connected both sides of Pakistan in the early years of the
nation-state, as Pakistan served as a symbol for ideals of social justice and the protection of
minorities at the time. Anisuzzaman, a young historian, was one of the most outspoken
representatives of this view among the young East Pakistanis. “I was arguing that one partition
had not solved the problem. Another may not do the same… I had my unshaken faith in
Pakistan.”54 On the other hand, Rehman Sobhan, an economist, represented the other view. “The
Punjabis knew very little about us, and considered themselves superior to us. They were the
ruling class.”55 Ideological and theoretical considerations gave way to political actions with a
clear agenda that rested largely on macro-economic reform, as reflected in the 6-point demands
of Awami League coalition in 1966. “When it was drafted, I was very close to [party leader]
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman,” Sobhan stated. “I began believing after the 1965 war that Pakistan
could not exist with military rule.”56 The strident vision of a Bangladeshi future independent
from Pakistan was expressed in a series of new magazines, including Purba Megh, Ganasakti
and Sanskriti, Forum, edited by young intellectuals such as Sobhan and Badruddin Umar.57

After Hameeda Hossain returned to Pakistan in the 1960s, she met and married Kamal
Hossain, an activist in the rising Bengali national movement of the 1960s and an author of the
Bangladesh constitution. Along with him, Rehman Sobhan, and others, she became embroiled in

55 Interview with Rehman Sobhan, 6:00.
56 Interview with Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, 27:16.
the nationalist movement.\textsuperscript{58} Through the brutal 1971 war, she was increasingly preoccupied with the plight of women subject to horrific violence and attacks during the war. She has been living in Bangladesh since as an activist whose work focuses on the condition of women and oppressed communities in the country.

West and East Bengali scholars were often connected across the caesura of nation-state formation through educational institutions in the West. Hossain pursued her PhD in history at Oxford with Tapan Raychaudhuri, the important West Bengali historian, in the 1970s. Her political positioning was formed through her scholarly work with Raychaudhuri and through her experience in East Bengal, including the 1971 war. Like Hussein and Raychaudhuri’s interactions at Cambridge, Rehman Sobhan developed a strong personal friendship with Amartya Sen during their studies together at Cambridge.\textsuperscript{59} And, in a later period, Ahmed Kamal, a student of Ranajit Guha, developed his friendship with Dipesh Chakrabarty during their student days together at the Australian National University at Canberra.

The Bangladeshi activist and political scientist, Badruddin Umar, further illuminates the differences and convergences of West Bengali and Bangladeshi trajectories. A committed Marxist for most of his life, his intellectual concerns were not focused on the critique of liberal-bourgeois and developmentalist nationalism – as preoccupied Partha Chatterjee – but rather, on overcoming the persistent failure of state-making in East Pakistan/Bangladesh. The distinctive religion and language of the Bangladeshi people were central elements of Umar’s thought and

\textsuperscript{58} Rehman Sobhan made significant contributions to nation-building in both Pakistan and Bangladesh period as well as in issues of welfare economics.
work. He was a dedicated activist of the language movement, and as an heir to the legacy of the *Buddhir Mukti Andolon*. Umar was the first to write the history of the Bengali language movement of 1952 on the basis of oral sources that he collected. He recalled, “In 1963 I thought that I better write on the developments [of the language movement] that took place since 1947, as I did not know anything… I actually interviewed more than a hundred people.” In fact, Badruddin Umar’s upbringing in the 1940s and ‘50s included interactions with the *Tamaddun Majlis*, an organization that was an outgrowth of the *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* in the new East Pakistan. And his father, Abul Hashim, a religious thinker and an important left-leaning political organizer within the Muslim League, was a close affiliate of the language movement.

Mortaza Bashir, another East Pakistani/Bangladeshi, similarly straddled the line between activist and scholar – serving as an “organic intellectual” during the period of nationalist struggle. Born in 1932, Bashir was the son of the famed intellectual and *Buddhir Mukti Andolon* leader, the linguist Muhammad Shahidullah. His father’s collection of art books, including of Renaissance, Bengali and Indian art, offered Bashir an eclectic art education. As he grew up with access to his father’s extensive library, he discovered his special affinity for visual imagery and histories of art. “My older brothers informed me that I used to look at the Bengali magazines like *Prabashi, Bichitra, Bharatvarsha*, and *Modern Review*. On the front page there were always

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paintings published by the likes of Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Ramkikhar Baij…"63

In the summer of 1947, Mortaza Bashir, at the age of 15, worked for the student wing of the Communist Party in Bogra, in northern Bengal. By the time, he had become fascinated by poster art and images on signboards. He started to draw sketches of Lenin, Stalin, Gandhi, and Subhas Chandra Bose. It was then that he met the famous political activist, Bhabani Sen, who was captivated by these sketches, and encouraged Bashir to become an artist, to “express the essence of life and travails of the masses in such a way so as to reinvigorate society.” Bashir saw art as a road toward political organizing and activism.

He studied in Dhaka at the newly formed Institute of Fine Arts in the early years of the new state, from 1949 to 1954. During this time, he followed closely the events of 1952, when students and activists gathered in protest of the Urdu-only language policy and four students were killed. Bashir wrote poetry, including one titled “Parbe Na” (or “You May Not!”) with reference to the motives of the Pakistan government. In 1954, he put up a major exhibited linocuts and oil paintings, the first visual art exhibition to cover the events of 1952.

After a stint of art education in Italy, he returned to Pakistan from 1958 to 1970, and spent most of his time shuttling as an artist between West and East Pakistan. Propelled by the spirit of *Pakistaniyaat*, in 1958, he traveled to Karachi in search of work and when he could not find any potential patrons, he went to London, worked for BBC Bengali Service, and participated in a 1958 exhibition with other Pakistani painters. Returning in 1959, he met with the important West Pakistani cultural figure, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and began to exhibit his work in Karachi in the early 1960s. His *Wall* series of oil colors, first exhibited in Karachi, signaled the beginning of what

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63 Interview with Murtaza Bashir, 2:00.
Bashir termed his “abstract realism,” an investment in forms and shapes inspired by actual, tangible conditions of life in Pakistan. As he mentioned in an interview, he felt that in the late 1960s, Pakistani artists faced what abstract expressionists of the 1930s and ‘40s were facing: a world of anger and resentment. Abstraction born out of anger motivated his art. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, then director of the Pakistan Arts Council in Lahore, stated, “Bashir’s walls are not abstractions conceived in fancy but recreations of actual visual phenomena which confront us every day without registering themselves on our perceptions – rotting bricks and stones, hieroglyphics of chipped plaster, the words left on a wall by posters ripped off in anger, ink splashed and graffiti etched out in boredom, the meaninglessness and the ennui of it all, the totality of non-communication.”64 The tragedies of the 1940s called East Bengali artist-activists, such as Bashir, to make a reckoning.65

The connected Banglaphone worlds of Hameeda Hossain, Badruddin Umar, and Mortaza Bashir form a contrast to the careers of many West Bengali thinkers. If West Bengali postcolonial thinkers sought to critique the colonial and postcolonial states of India, scholars in Bangladesh sought to bring a new state into existence. If West Bengali thinkers were caught up in postcolonial struggles in the 1960s and 1970s, Bangladeshi activist-intellectuals were facing another stage in an ongoing anticolonial war. The societal future as imagined by East Pakistani intellectuals of that period, such as Anisuzzaman, Badruddin Umar, Sirajul Islam and Rehman Sobhan, foreshadowed the vision of emancipation from below sketched out by subaltern studies thinkers in West Bengal in the 1970s and 1980s.66 A subalternist futurity arrived first in East Pakistan before it emerged in West Bengal.

64 Quoted in Anwar Dil, Bangladesh: An Intercultural Memoir (Dhaka: Adorn, 2011), 162.
65 Interview with Sunil Janah.
66 Interview with Anisuzzaman: https://corpora.tufts.edu/catalog/tufts:MS165.001.016.00001; Interview with Badruddin Umar: https://corpora.tufts.edu/catalog/tufts:MS165.001.017.00001.
When we explore the twentieth century’s history with respect to the voices of decolonizing intellectuals who lived through it, we find individuals cutting across juxtaposed spaces of global whiteness and the Third World and demonstrating conceptual irreverence toward their own disciplines, which emanated out of a broader critique of the postcolonial world of authoritarianism and neo-colonialism. The narrative of linear transition from “colonial” to “postcolonial” periods simply cannot grasp the entangled, globally juxtaposed trajectories of West Bengali and Bangladeshi life and thought in the 1950-1980 period. Rather, an intellectual history grounded in life narratives within a region across nation-state lines, and that explores how thinkers lived and worked across the juxtaposed spaces of global whiteness and the Third World, place into clear vision what is distinctive about South Asian postcolonial thought in its Bengali variations.

The exploration of east and west Bengal outside of the strictures of colonial and national boundaries enlivens these thinkers outside of the frequently metonymic relationship to India they occupy within postcolonial thought we have sought to historicize. Tying together West and East Bengal in this manner reframes South Asian intellectual history outside of only the Indian/Pakistani nations or the British Empire. In doing so, the lifeworlds of this cohort reshapes the global history of the twentieth century by placing decolonization alongside more familiar historical processes, e.g. World War II, Holocaust, and demise of Marxism as markers

for twentieth century history.\textsuperscript{68} This regional critique of the nation/empire complex is not confined to “Bengal,”\textsuperscript{69} as other regional contexts, such as Tamil and Malayalee-speaking south India, provide equally compelling sites where local/global links and intellectual insurrections around caste, religion, and Marxism,\textsuperscript{70} were just as central to a broader historical shift in the postcolonial imagination. Given that Bengal was the epicenter of postcolonial thought the region is the empirical center of this research. But this intellectual history expands familiar definitions of Bengal to explicitly include eastern, and Muslim voices, as well as the question of state and nation’s interplay with ideas, and therefore points to other Indian linguistic communities and their debates about caste, community, or Marxism to similarly reframe the twentieth century. When Bengal’s over-determined past is provincialized, the space is then carved to conceptually understand other regions/intellectual contexts more thoroughly.

Looking at intellectuals of the period in this historical way also allows us to reflect on our understanding of the meaning of “postcolonialism,” as it operates as an institutional, disciplinary category today. A history of the Banglophone decolonization cohort demonstrates attempts to theorize society in ways that both imbibed but critiqued the Eurocentric colonial past as well as the social science training received in disciplines like history, economics, literary criticism, and anthropology, thereby disrupting the continuation of colonial logics in the “postcolonial” present.

\textsuperscript{68} For a popular history written along these lines, see Pankaj Mishra, \textit{From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals who Remade Asia} (New York: Penguin, 2012).

\textsuperscript{69} See recent work complicating the nationalism inherent in South Asian historiography regarding Bengal in Bose, \textit{Recasting the Region}, and Andrew Sartori, \textit{Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

Intellectuals also defied the neo-colonial logics of post-colonial nation-states, which included authoritarianism and militarization, and urban bourgeois consolidation.

As Jean and John Comaroff in their 2011 *Theory from the South* write, “as the contemporary capitalist world order – at once global and local and everything in between – catches all and sundry in its web, as its peripheries become its vanguard and its centers mimic its peripheries, so the world is turned upside down” (44). Through prosopographic intellectual history, the world emerges as empirically bigger than what is understood from a Eurocentric perspective, outside of familiar markers like the Holocaust, World War II, and liberalisms and their discontents in the Western world. The rise of postcolonial thought produced distinctive *Southern* imaginations, which grappled with, but were not fully determined by, the globally entangled march from colony to nation-state. During the crisis of the postcolonial nation-state, we observe decades of unprecedented conceptual volatility, as a cohort intellectuals circulated widely around the world, while also turning towards the anchors of community and vernacular culture. Postcolonial criticism insisted that a core requirement for freedom was *the ability to use the imagination differently and irreverently*. Their collective work represents a rebellion against the conceptual closure of the postcolonial nation-state, but also against its material coercive mechanisms. If “postcolonialism” does have a coherent intellectual history, its contributions have been articulated in the historically tangible struggles of politics and life.
Appendix

List of Interviewees

West Bengal, India

1. Amiya Bagchi (b 1936) Economist
2. Pranab Bardhan (b 1939) Economist
3. Andre Beteille (b1934) Sociologist
4. Krishna Bose (b 1930) Politician
5. Dipesh Chakrabarty (b 1948) Historian
6. Satyesh Chakrabarty (b1931) Geographer
7. Partha Chatterjee (b 1947) Political philosopher, historian
8. Barid Barun Chatterjee (b1925) Medical doctor
9. Alokaranjan Dasgupta (b1933) Poet
10. Uma Dasgupta (b1942) Historian
11. Amlan Datta (b1924)  
   Political Philosopher
12. Jyotirmoy Datta (b1936)  
   Poet
13. Kamal Datta (b1939)  
   Physicist
14. Amalendu De (1930-2014)  
   Historian
15. Barun De (b1932)  
   Historian
16. Nabaneeta Dev Sen (b1938)  
   Writer, Literary critic
17. Ketaki Kushari Dyson (b1940)  
   Poet, literary critic
18. Sankha Ghosh (b1936)  
   Poet, literary critic
19. Jharna Gourlay (b1936)  
   BBC producer
20. Ranajit Guha (b1923)  
   Historian
21. Sunil Janah (1918-2012)  
   Photographer
22. Purushottama Lal (b1938)  
   Publisher, writer
23. Partha Mitter (b1938)  
   Art historian
24. Pradyot Kumar Mukhopadhyay (b1929)  
   Philosopher
25. Jyotirmoy Pal Chaudhury (b1934)  
   Historian
26. Prasanta Ray (b1943)  
   Sociologist
27. Sibnarayan Ray (1921-2008)  
   Literary critic, philosopher
28. Tapan Raychaudhuri (1926-2014)  
   Historian
29. Amartya Sen (b1933)  
   Economist, philosopher
30. Abdus Sobhan (b1936)  
   Historian
31. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (b1942)  
   Literary critic
32. Ranabir Samaddar (b 1942)  
   Historian, public intellectual
33. Ronald Inden (b. 1940)  
   Historian, Indologist
34. Leonard Gordon (b. 1938)  
   Historian

**Bangladesh**

35. Mustafa Zaman Abbasi (b1937)  
   Singer, Poet, Writer
36. Emajuddin Ahmed (b1933)  
   Political Scientist
37. Sufia Ahmed (b1932)  
   Historian
38. Wakil Ahmed (b?)  
   Historian
39. Mortaza Bashir (b1932)  
   Artist
40. Abdul Gaffar Choudhury (b1934)  
   Journalist, Poet, Writer
41. Binod Bihari Choudhury (1910 - 2013)Teacher
42. Afia Dil (b1926)  
   Linguist
43. Anwar Dil (b 1928)  
   Linguist
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Birth Year</th>
<th>Profession</th>
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<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>Abdul Gafur</td>
<td>1929</td>
<td>Journalist, writer</td>
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<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Syed Anwarul Hafiz</td>
<td>b 1930</td>
<td>Writer</td>
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<td>46.</td>
<td>Hameeda Hossain</td>
<td>b 1936</td>
<td>Historian</td>
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<td>47.</td>
<td>Kamal Hossain</td>
<td>b 1937</td>
<td>Jurist, Politician</td>
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<td>48.</td>
<td>Sirajul Islam</td>
<td>b 1941</td>
<td>Historian</td>
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<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Rouqaq Jahan</td>
<td>(1944)</td>
<td>Policy Consultant</td>
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<td>50.</td>
<td>Sardar Fazlul Karim</td>
<td>b 1925</td>
<td>Political Scientist</td>
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<td>51.</td>
<td>Muinuddin Ahmad Khan</td>
<td>b 1931</td>
<td>Historian, Religious Studies Scholar</td>
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<td>52.</td>
<td>Nazia Khanum</td>
<td>b 1943</td>
<td>Academic, British policy consultant</td>
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<td>53.</td>
<td>Talukdar Maniruzzaman</td>
<td>b 1938</td>
<td>Political Scientist</td>
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<td>54.</td>
<td>Abdul Matin</td>
<td>(1924-2013)</td>
<td>Journalist, writer</td>
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<td>55.</td>
<td>Abdul Momen</td>
<td>b 1938</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
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<td>56.</td>
<td>Badruddin Umar</td>
<td>b 1931</td>
<td>Writer, political scientist, political activist</td>
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<td>57.</td>
<td>Serajur Rahman</td>
<td>(1934-2015)</td>
<td>BBC journalist</td>
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<td>59.</td>
<td>Rehman Sobhan</td>
<td>b 1935</td>
<td>Economist</td>
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<tr>
<td>60.</td>
<td>Niaz Zaman</td>
<td>b 1941</td>
<td>Writer, literary critic</td>
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