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ARTICLE

Partition, Bengali Refugee Critiques of Postcolonial State and Capitalism, and the Subaltern Origins of the Cold War in India, 1947–1950

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Abstract

The British Raj formally ended on 15 August 1947. In the years following the bifurcation of British India into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, between 11 and 18 million people migrated to escape sectarian pogroms at the hands of the majority population. By 1950, many South Asian – specifically Bengali – refugees were radically critiquing decolonization. Theorizing from their experiences of proletarianization, East Bengali refugees argued that decolonization had been incomplete. The postcolonial Indian state was a neocolonial state allied to Western imperialism. Refugees imagined themselves as part of a worldwide struggle between Anglo-American imperialism and Sino-Soviet-led socialist anti-imperialism. Refugees assembled in hundreds and thousands across the Indian state of West Bengal to overthrow regimes of big private property. They condemned the operations of money economy. They aimed to overcome capitalism. Inspired by Chinese communists, they built a vast confederal democracy uniting refugee camps and colonies – a 'refugee polis'. This article offers a socially-contextualized intellectual history of this epic transformation, which delegitimized the postcolonial Indian state and dramatically drew the country, through struggles waged by refugees, into the tumult of the Cold War. The article prompts us to visualize the subaltern origins of the Cold War in India.

I

The British Raj came to a formal end on 15 August 1947. In the years following the bifurcation of British India into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan, between 11 and 18 million people migrated to escape sectarian pogroms at the hands of the majority population.[1] The taste of independence was bittersweet.[2] By 1950, many South Asian – specifically Bengali – refugees were radically critiquing decolonization. Theorizing from their experiences of proletarianization, they argued that

[1]Uditi Sen, *Citizen refugee: forging the Indian nation after Partition* (Cambridge, 2018), p. 2.

[2]Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia: meanings of freedom in post-independence West Bengal, 1947–52* (Abingdon, 2009).

decolonization had been incomplete. The postcolonial Indian state was a neocolonial state allied to Western imperialism. A new anti-colonial struggle needed to be waged, with inspiration drawn from the Soviet Union and China. Refugees assembled in hundreds and thousands to overthrow regimes of big private property. They critiqued the operations of money economy. They aimed to overcome capitalism. In an astonishing reversal, the Indian National Congress – hitherto seen by most Indians as the principal force of anti-colonial nationalism – came to be seen as the greatest threat to popular freedom. We need a socially thick intellectual history of this epic transformation, which delegitimized the postcolonial Indian state among significant sections of its citizenry, and dramatically drew the country, through struggles waged by refugees, into the tumult of the Cold War.

East Bengali Hindu refugees were one of the earliest population-groups in Afro-Asia to transition en masse from being fervid supporters of anti-colonial nationalism to becoming bitter critics of the postcolonial nation-state. Postcolonial Pakistani state authorities had colluded with majoritarian Muslim mobs to commit mass murder, rapes, and theft of landed property and wealth, precipitating large-scale emigration of non-Muslims, primarily Hindus, from Muslim-majority East Bengal/Pakistan to the Hindu-majority Indian state of West Bengal. Uditi Sen summarizes that 'official estimates of East Bengali migrants who sought refuge in India between 1946 and 1970 vary between 5.8 million and 4.1 million. West Bengal alone took in over 3.9 million refugees.'[3] Of these migrants, more than 2.5 million refugees left East Bengal/Pakistan to enter India between 1946 and 1950.[4] Thanks to several generations of scholars, we know how the postcolonial Indian state undertook refugee rehabilitation and about the growth of refugee activism in response to the state's failures. We know how class, caste, and gender stratification moulded refugee lives and access to state aid.[5] Scholars have mined literature and cinema to understand refugee sensibilities.[6]

This article offers a subaltern intellectual history of Bengali refugees. It presents these refugees as original critics of capitalist political economy. Such an intellectual history must go beyond great men and canonical texts. In Indian historiography, the Subaltern Studies Collective made pioneering contributions here. Ranajit Guha studied peasant political consciousness, taking 'the peasant-rebel's awareness of his

[3]Sen, *Citizen refugee*, p. 7.

[4]Ibid., p. 42.

[5]Prafulla K. Chakrabarti, *The marginal men: the refugees and the left political syndrome in West Bengal* (Calcutta, 1999; orig. edn 1990); Ranabir Samaddar, ed., *Reflections on Partition in the East* (Delhi, 1997); Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: violence, nationalism and history in India* (Cambridge, 2001); Joya Chatterji, *The spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge, 2007); Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar, *The long partition and the making of modern South Asia: refugees, boundaries, histories* (New York, NY, 2007); Yasmin Khan, *The great partition: the making of India and Pakistan* (New Haven, CT, 2007); Sen, *Citizen refugee*; Sekhar Bandyopadhyay and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and partition in Bengal: the story of Dalit refugees, 1946–1961* (Oxford, 2022).

[6]Debjani Sengupta, *The partition of Bengal: fragile borders and new identities* (Cambridge, 2015); Rini Bhattacharya Mehta and Debali Mookerjea-Leonard, eds., *The Indian Partition in literature and films: history, politics, and aesthetics* (Abingdon, 2015); Jaydip Sarkar and Rupayan Mukherjee, eds., *Partition literature and cinema: a critical introduction* (Abingdon, 2020).

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own world and his will to change it as our point of departure'.[7] More recently, scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India, China, and Africa have revealed how capitalist penetration of social relations engendered new forms of thinking about labour, property, value, state, and freedom. They have illuminated colonized peasants, industrial workers, and small traders as intellectual actors.[8]

These historians have expanded the archives and scope of intellectual history. Taking a cue from them, this article argues that East Bengali Hindu refugees grappled with their subalternity by producing innovative political and economic thought. We cannot understand their political agency without understanding their political theory. Like the articles by Dina Gusejnova and Sebastian Musch in this special issue, my article foregrounds refugee intellectual history – taking the refugees seriously as thinkers, rather than as mere victims of history. To do this kind of intellectual history of non-elite actors requires thick readings of state archives, juxtaposed with published texts. Hence, this article visualizes refugee camps, colonies, and processions as key sites of collective intellectual production in early postcolonial India. In line with this special issue, I visualize these refugee camps, colonies, and processions as constituting a 'refugee polis' – a vast and majestic framework of refugee democratic confederalism that challenged the postcolonial Indian state.

East Bengali refugees were not the first actors to introduce anti-capitalist socialist ideas into western Bengal. In the interwar years, some Hindu high-caste middle-class-origin actors had already found in communism an adequate standpoint for critiquing British imperialism. For figures like M. N. Roy (1887–1954), anti-colonial nationalism morphed into communist internationalism.[9] Muslims from rural Bengal also found communist ideology and politics helpful in challenging British colonial and high-caste Hindu dominance. Among them were the politician Muzaffar Ahmad (1889–1973) and the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899–1976).[10] By the 1940s, communism animated the Tebhaga peasant rebellion that convulsed sub-Himalayan North Bengal.[11] However, without Partition-induced forced displacement and immiseration of millions of people, could communism have become a hegemonic social force across the whole of postcolonial West Bengal? Forsaking vain speculation, I would argue that East Bengali refugees lent plausibility to communist political ideology and practice across West Bengal – moving it from the geopolitical margins to the mainstream. Apart from Tripura and Kerala, this had few parallels in postcolonial India.

[7]Ranajit Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India* (Durham, NC, 1999; orig. edn 1983), p. 11.

[8]Andrew Sartori, *Liberalism in empire: an alternative history* (Oakland, CA, 2014); Emma Hunter, *Political thought and the public sphere in Tanzania: freedom, democracy and citizenship in the era of decolonization* (Cambridge, 2015); Milinda Banerjee, *The mortal god: imagining the sovereign in colonial India* (Cambridge, 2018); Andrew B. Liu, *Tea war: a history of capitalism in China and India* (New Haven, CT, 2020); Aaron G. Jakes, *Egypt's occupation: colonial economism and the crises of capitalism* (Stanford, CA, 2020); Vikram Visana, *Uncivil liberalism: labour, capital and commercial society in Dadabhai Naoroji's political thought* (Cambridge, 2022).

[9]Kris Manjapra, *M. N. Roy: Marxism and colonial cosmopolitanism* (Delhi, 2010).

[10]Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An early communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, 1913–1929* (Delhi, 2011); Banerjee, *Mortal god*.

[11]Adrienne Cooper, *Sharecropping and sharecroppers' struggles in Bengal, 1930–1950* (Calcutta, 1988).

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Operating from their anti-capitalist socialist standpoint, Bengali refugees diagnosed the postcolonial state as an 'imperialist' (in Bengali, *samrajyavadi*) polity. They did not use the term 'neocolonial', but their arguments accord with the Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkrumah's (1909–72) definition from 1965: 'The essence of neocolonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.'[12] This article demonstrates that Bengali refugees effectively denounced the postcolonial state as a neocolonial one, without using the term itself.

Engaging with Bengali refugee political thought involves offering a subaltern history of the Cold War. Traditionally, historians have assumed that the Cold War arrived in South Asia in the 1950s.[13] As one scholar summarizes: 'Historians generally date the beginning of the Cold War in South Asia to Stalin's death and the power struggles that followed in its wake.'[14] More recent scholarship has shown, however, that there were already signs in the late 1940s that India would become an amphitheatre of the Cold War. What was uncertain was whether it would join the Western or the Soviet bloc. In the immediate aftermath of independence, many Indian statesmen, including Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), were closer to the Western bloc. Much of this scholarship on early Indian involvement in the Cold War focuses on statesmen, foreign policy, military co-operation, and economic aid. More recently, scholars have also started studying non-state actors and political struggles.[15]

It is increasingly clear that, rather than focusing on India as a homogenous unit, we need granular studies of specific regions and social groups to understand the origins of the Cold War in South Asia. In this vein, Jayita Sarkar studies Indian, British, American, and French contestations during the late 1940s to secure control over monazite – a key resource for atomic energy production – present in the southern Indian princely state of Travancore. She suggests that in 'the summer of 1949 … events transformed the minerals of Travancore overnight into instruments of Cold War politics'.[16] Similarly, this article focuses on West Bengal to emphasize the local origins of the Cold War. Arguably, the Cold War emerged earlier in Travancore and West Bengal than in many other regions of India.

[12]Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-colonialism: the last stage of imperialism* (New York, NY, 1965), p. ix.

[13]See, for example, the textbook widely taught in Indian universities (and elsewhere), Peter Calvocoressi, *World politics, 1945–2000* (New York, NY, 2001).

[14]Artemy M. Kalinovsky, 'The Cold War in South and Central Asia', in Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle, eds., *The Routledge handbook of the Cold War* (Abingdon, 2014), p. 179.

[15]Robert J. McMahon, *The Cold War on the periphery: the United States, India, and Pakistan* (New York, NY, 1994); Paul M. McGarr, *The Cold War in South Asia: Britain, the United States and the Indian subcontinent, 1945–1965* (Cambridge, 2013); David C. Engerman, *The price of aid: the economic Cold War in India* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Manu Bhagavan, ed., *India and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019); Su Lin Lewis and Carolien Stolte, eds., *The lives of Cold War Afro-Asianism* (Amsterdam, 2022).

[16]Jayita Sarkar, '"Wean them away from French tutelage": Franco-Indian nuclear relations and Anglo-American anxieties during the early Cold War, 1948–1952', *Cold War History*, 15 (2015), pp. 375–94, at p. 386.

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Recent scholarship has explored the popular lives and imaginaries of the Cold War from the 1950s to the 1970s.[17] But some historians extend the story to earlier years. Vikrant Dadawala highlights that

> many Third World intellectuals consciously chose to align themselves with a side in what they saw as a global cultural struggle. In the case of India in particular, the cultural Cold War did not begin with the formation of the CCF [Congress for Cultural Freedom] in 1950, but with the October Revolution of 1917. … By the time the first CIA-sponsored CCF Conference took place in India in 1951, Indian intellectuals and writers were already enthusiastic Cold Warriors, either in thrall to the idea of a possible 'Soviet India' or terrified by it.

Dadawala highlights the 'colonial 'pre-history' of the cultural Cold War', foregrounding 'the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), and various Indo-Soviet Friendship Societies and Cine-Clubs'.[18]

Robert Shaffer focuses on the Punjabi textile trader J. J. Singh and the India League of America (ILA). These financially successful expatriates championed Indian independence, while also seeking to align India to American/Western anti-communist Cold War politics. They lobbied American politicians to favour India. Shaffer concludes that, in the late 1940s, 'the ILA presented a liberal anti-Communist perspective, which at times retained a critical edge towards US policy but at other times shaded into support for US goals and means'.[19]

Elisabeth Armstrong shows how radical women's movements nourished popular Cold War Afro-Asian solidarities and anti-imperial antagonisms in the late 1940s:

> In 1948, Kolkata [Calcutta] was a city in foment that seeded revolt spilling beyond the confines of independent India to revolutionary movements across Asia. The World Federation of Democratic Youth held its Southeast Asian convention in Kolkata in February, 1948 … Students from Indonesia, Vietnam, Burma and elsewhere demanded an independence not just from colonial occupation, but from capitalism itself.[20]

This article, too, tracks the popular Cold War – to be a bit provocative, the subaltern Cold War – to the late 1940s. My research in the Intelligence Branch records housed in the West Bengal State Archives in Calcutta reveals that, as early as the late 1940s, refugee politics intensified the efflorescence of communism and the erosion

[17]Lewis and Stolte, eds., *Cold War Afro-Asianism*.

[18]Vikrant Dadawala, 'War, famine, and newsprint: the making of Soviet India, 1942–1945', in Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, and Katherine Zien, eds., *The cultural Cold War and the global south: sites of contest and communitas* (New York, NY, 2021), pp. 202–3.

[19]Robert Shaffer, 'J. J. Singh and the India League of America, 1945–1959: pressing at the margins of the Cold War consensus', *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 31 (2012), pp. 68–103, at p. 83.

[20]Elisabeth Armstrong, 'Here and there: a story of women's internationalism, 1948–1953', in Lewis and Stolte, eds., *Cold War Afro-Asianism*, p. 23. Calcutta was renamed as Kolkata in 2001. To maintain uniformity, I use the older name throughout this article.

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of legitimacy of the nationalist Congress government in the state. Non-elite refugees imagined themselves as part of a worldwide struggle between Anglo-American imperialism and Sino-Soviet-led socialist anti-imperialism. East Bengali refugees, despite their local operations, could challenge the Indian state's legitimacy because they saw themselves as part of a global Cold War. They can thus be better understood when we abandon methodological nationalism and adopt the optics of global history.[21]

II

> Mr Himangshu is not a competitor in love, but a claimant to the labour (*shramer angshidar*) of his wife. … Subrata thought that as long as Arati did wage-work (*chakri*) in Himangshu's office, he could not exert his full claim as a husband/master (*svamitver dabi*).[22]

Narendranath Mitra's (1916–75) short story 'Avataranika' ('Descent'), published in 1949 and made into the movie *Mahanagar* (*Metropolis*) in 1963, is perhaps the most celebrated Bengali fictional narrative of refugee immiseration produced in the immediate aftermath of the Partition. Authored by an East Bengali man, the story focuses on a Brahmin family impoverished by the Partition. Prior to 1947, the pater familias, Priyagopal Majumdar, like many other high-caste East Bengali Hindu men, was an official in a *zamindari* landed estate in East Bengal. Forced to leave his land and job, Priyagopal migrated with his family to Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal. Priyagopal's son Subrata gained employment in a bank, but the income could not sustain the large family. Hence, like many other refugee women, Arati, Subrata's wife, had to become a wage-labourer.[23] She found employment in a company selling sewing machines, owned by a Brahmin entrepreneur, Himangshu Mukherjee.

The drama stems from Arati's double subalternity – first, as a woman within a patriarchal household; and second, as a woman in a capitalist firm. High-caste Hindu lineages traditionally prevented women from working beyond the domestic space. They extracted value from female labour within the household, while obstructing outsiders from gaining access to the bodies of 'their' women. The feminist historian Uma Chakravarti terms this system of monopolizing female labour 'Brahminical patriarchy': 'Indeed women themselves were the property, both in terms of their

[21] Anuradha Bhattacharjee, *The second homeland: Polish refugees in India* (Delhi, 2012); Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a political idea* (London, 2013); Rana Mitter, 'Imperialism, transnationalism, and the reconstruction of post-war China: UNRRA in China, 1944–7', *Past and Present*, 218, suppl. 8 (2013), pp. 51–69; Peter Gatrell, *The making of the modern refugee* (Oxford, 2013); Laura Madokoro, *Elusive refuge: Chinese migrants in the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Arie M. Dubnov and Laura Robson, eds., *Partitions: a transnational history of twentieth-century territorial separatism* (Stanford, CA, 2019); Guang Pan, *A study of Jewish refugees in China, 1933–1945: history, theories and the Chinese pattern* (Singapore, 2019); Milinda Banerjee and Kerstin von Lingen, eds., 'Forced migration and refugee resettlement in the long 1940s', special issue, *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 185–303.

[22] Narendranath Mitra, 'Avataranika', in *Galpamala* (Calcutta, 1956), pp. 135–6.

[23] Deepita Chakravarty and Ishita Chakravarty, *Women, labour and the economy in India: from migrant menservants to uprooted girl children maids* (Abingdon, 2016).

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reproductive and their productive labour, of men.'[24] Hence, Priyagopal and Subrata felt aggrieved about Arati's wage-work, though they benefited from her earnings.

Arati presented her *maine* (monthly wage) to Priyagopal as *pranami* (tribute), but the father-in-law angrily rejected this as *ghush* (bribe). The author comments that, as a *zamindari* official, Priyagopal had regularly accepted bribes couched as *pranami*. But these were offered by peasant men and women whom Priyagopal saw as *prajas* (subjects). In East Bengal, these were Muslims and lower-caste Hindus. When his daughter-in-law offered him her wage, Priyagopal felt transformed from a tribute-extracting master into a purchasable commodity: 'Arati wanted to buy with a hundred-rupee note his ideals, his beliefs, his whole personality.'[25]

To Subrata, Arati's employer Himangshu seemed a co-sharer in Arati's body. In Sanskrit and Bengali, *svamitva* denotes powers of 'ownership, mastership, lordship', including that exerted by a husband over his wife.[26] In classical Hindu law, the relation between a possession and its possessor is termed *svasvamisambandha*.[27] Subrata, like many other high-caste Hindu men, saw his wife as a possession. The Indian unit of currency, the rupee, was traditionally divided into sixteen parts, each part termed an *ana*. Conceptualizing his wife as a rupee, Subrata lamented that Himangshu 'owned ten *anas* of Arati's bodily labour' (*daihik shramer dash anar sharik*). So he could not exert sixteen-*ana svamitva* – that is, complete ownership – over his wife.[28] This erosion of patriarchal ownership, *svamitva*, by the capitalist wage-form made him resent his wife.

But wage-work did not offer refugee women emancipation either. Arati had to join her colleagues to agitate for the 'rightful earnings' (*paona*) denied to them by Himangshu in his effort to maximize company profits. As women banded together to bargain for better wages and share their gains, there grew a female working-class consciousness.[29] The story concluded with Arati resigning in protest against Himangshu insulting a lower-class Anglo-Indian colleague, Edith, as a prostitute with 'loose morals'. Arati felt that women could not work under such abusive conditions. Ironically, Arati's parents-in-law and husband condemned her decision. They felt that Arati had erred in defending a lower-caste woman against Himangshu, a Brahmin like them. Brahminical patriarchy colluded here with capitalist patriarchy.[30]

At another social pole, lower-caste Hindu peasants from East Bengal often became landless wage-workers in West Bengal in the late 1940s. These refugees generally could not textualize their experiences. However, the celebrated play *Natun Ihudi* (*The new Jew*, first staged in Calcutta in 1951) gives us indirect access to their consciousness. The author, Salil Sen, was not a refugee but was close to the Revolutionary Socialist Party, with consequent proximity to refugee activism. In the play, the lower-caste Namashudra peasant Keshtadas conceptualized the agrarian labour

[24]Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering caste: through a feminist lens* (Delhi, 2018), p. 70.
[25]Mitra, 'Avataranika', pp. 131–2.
[26]Monier Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit–English dictionary* (Oxford, 1960; orig. edn 1899), p. 1284.
[27]Christopher T. Fleming, *Ownership and inheritance in Sanskrit jurisprudence* (Oxford, 2020).
[28]Mitra, 'Avataranika', p. 136.
[29]Ibid., pp. 131, 140.
[30]Ibid., pp. 141–3.

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which he performed in East Bengal as service to the goddess Lakshmi (*Lakshmir seva*).[31] Scholars have shown how such perceptions of agrarian work as piety were widespread among Bengali peasants. Peasant landed property was similarly sacralized.[32] For Keshtadas's wife, Ashalata, 'the homestead is the temple of Lakshmi' (*bastubari Lakshmir than*). The peasant couple ultimately had to sell this sacred homestead (*bastu*) and become refugees (*udbastu*; literally, uprooted from *bastu*). When Keshtadas took on factory work in West Bengal, he saw it as succumbing to slavery (*dasatva*).[33]

These literary texts indicate pervasive Bengali refugee anxiety about the capitalist wage-form. The Intelligence Branch archives of the postcolonial Indian state reveal an analogous atmosphere of opinion. Refugees resisted being reduced to landless wage-workers. They wanted to acquire control over land and other means of production, so that they could live a dignified life. They asserted this as a primordial right. The archives reveal a fundamental lack of translatability between this refugee demand and state responses. The state wanted to solve the refugee 'problem' by giving cash doles, loans, and other forms of monetary relief. However, like the family in 'Avataranika', refugees disliked becoming mere recipients of money. From the family names recorded in the archives, we realize that these refugees came from diverse caste backgrounds, but a shared sense of proletarianization fostered among them a nascent class consciousness.

The critique of the money form – more broadly, of commodification – came in various incarnations. When the state wanted to sell land to refugees, many rejected the possibility. Thus, at the first annual conference of the refugees of Santipur in Nadia district, on 17 October 1949, a meeting comprising about three hundred refugees resolved that 'Lands should be distributed to the refugees without any price. Suitable arrangements should be made for the employment of the able bodied refugees.'[34] In another public rejection of the money form and commodification, lower-caste peasant refugees sought to retain control over agrarian resources to ensure their own nourishment, rather than surrender their produce to the state for money, or, indeed, to commercialize it. A government report from December 1949 observed that thirty-four refugees of the Santoshpur refugee camp cultivated land, but 'showed unwillingness to stack paddy in front of the office of the camp and take cash price at controlled rate in lieu of paddy'.[35] A meeting of refugees in Jalpaiguri district on 28 November 1950 adopted resolutions 'asking the people not to give any share of the produce to the Government'.[36]

[31]Salil Sen, *Natun Ihudi* (Calcutta, 1957), p. 46.

[32]Sartori, *Liberalism in empire*; Banerjee, *Mortal god*.

[33]Sen, *Natun Ihudi*, pp. 25, 37, 46.

[34]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 30 Oct. 1949, West Bengal State Archives, Intelligence Branch, file on 'Weekly reports by the Department of Relief and Rehabilitation on Relief and Rehabilitation of East Bengal Refugees' (WBSA, IB, WR). Due to restricted access to these archives, I have not been authorized to mention file numbers.

[35]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 25 Dec. 1949, WBSA, IB, WR.

[36]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 10 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

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Refugees often demanded non-monetary productive resources to attain material self-sufficiency. Thus, in July 1950, the Refugee Central Rehabilitation Committee in Murshidabad district condemned 'the exorbitant price and scarcity of the food grains'. Members of refugee colonies in the district assembled to demand that 'supply of rice and paddy should have to be made through ration shops at low rate or through shops regulated by the Government in all the colonies'. In addition, there should be 'free medical aid and medicine'. The committee requested 'implements and equipment' for refugees who were 'weavers, fishermen, smiths, potters, and carpenters'. The state should ensure 'at least ten bighas of land to be allotted per family', the provision of tube-wells and tanks, and 'free primary education and free industrial institutions'.[37]

During a procession in Jalpaiguri on 26 August 1950, about four hundred refugees demanded from the state 'paddy seedlings for plantation, bullocks for ploughing, rice to eat and places for shelter'.[38] In November 1950, refugees at Sahidnagar colony, Dhakuria, demanded that the 'colony consisting of 5000 people should at once be declared by the Government as a rationed area or in the alternative, Government co-operative stores should be opened to supply the refugees with food stuff at controlled rates'.[39] The second annual conference of the All Bengal Refugee Council of Action, held on 23–24 December 1950, demanded that the state should establish schools and charitable dispensaries in refugee colonies, and should introduce rationing.[40]

The ultimate refugee demand was for land itself. Refugees defied the law to occupy lands belonging to big *zamindar* landlords or to the state. When the state deployed armed forces to evict the refugees, the latter resorted to violent resistance. In a meeting of about a hundred refugees organized at Sraddhananda Park in Calcutta on 17 December 1949, under the auspices of the All Bengal Bastuhara Karma Parishad, the speakers 'criticized the Government policy in cooperating with the zamindars in devising means to oust the refugees from the lands of the zamindars where they have erected huts. They urged for the unity among the refugees to stage a bigger struggle against the zamindars.'[41] The second annual open session of the All Bengal Bastuhara Karma Parishad, organized in Calcutta on 25 November 1950, demanded outright abolition of the *zamindari* system without any compensation, and free ration for refugees.[42] The second annual conference of the All Bengal Refugee Council of Action (23–24 December 1950) demanded that 'the zamindari

[37]'Translation of Refugee Central Rehabilitation Committee, P. O. Khagra, Murshidabad, 14 July 1950', WBSA, IB. I was not authorized to give file name and number here.

[38]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 10 Sept. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[39]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 19 Nov. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[40]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 24 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[41]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 25 Dec. 1949, WBSA, IB, WR.

[42]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 3 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

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system should be abolished without any compensation immediately and land should be distributed amongst the refugees and landless cultivators'.[43]

The Permanent Settlement of 1793 was the legal foundation of this *zamindari* system in Bengal. Through it, the British had introduced, for the first time in India, a system of private property in which the *zamindar* landowner had absolute rights over the soil, subject only to payments of revenue to the colonial state. Peasants had lost legal recognition of their customary agrarian rights. When refugees sought to overthrow this system, they struck at the foundations of the colonial private property regime that had survived the end of the Raj.

Ranajit Guha (1923–2023), the celebrated founder of the Subaltern Studies Collective, emerged from this milieu. Growing up in a landlord family of East Bengal, he felt a primordial guilt (*adim papabodh*) about these agrarian hierarchies.[44] During the 1940s, he became a communist activist, travelling from Calcutta to Europe. Following the Andhra line of the Communist Party of India (CPI), in the late 1940s he put his faith in the possibility of a Chinese-style agrarian socialist revolution in India. He visited revolutionary China and guided other Indian communists to visit the country.[45] Guha met Mao Zedong (1893–1976) in 1950 and wrote in ecstasy: 'What independence means, how our country shall be when it will become independent, we understand that when we go to China.'[46] He began researching the eighteenth-century physiocratic origins of the Permanent Settlement, which would culminate in a landmark intellectual history. Guha would argue that, in colonial conditions, European bourgeois ideology had transformed into a system of semi-feudal oppression.[47]

> Capitalism which had built up its hegemony in Europe by using the sharp end of Reason found it convenient to subjugate the peoples of the East by wielding the blunt head. This helped the indigenous elite as well to perpetuate their own authority in collaboration with colonialism and independently after decolonization.[48]

Behind that conviction lay the political ethos of early postcolonial West Bengal, and especially the collective refugee critiques of the Permanent Settlement.

If the Indian state had responded to refugee demands, it would have had to dismantle a colonial legal regime based on big private property, replacing it with collective social control of land and other material resources, self-managed by refugee camps and colonies and other subaltern communities. The postcolonial Indian state did not undertake such a transformation in the 1940s. Hence, refugees concluded that the state had betrayed the heritage of anti-colonial struggle, keeping intact

[43]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 24 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[44]Ranajit Guha, 'Chirasthayi bandobaster sutrapat' ('Beginnings of the Permanent Settlement'), in *Ranajit Guha rachanasangraha* (*Collected writings of Ranajit Guha*), vol. I (Calcutta, 2019), pp. 17–25, 92–5.

[45]Mohit Sen, *A traveller and the road: the journey of an Indian communist* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 77–80.

[46]Debraj Ghatak, 'Goyenda nathite Ranajit Guha, 1947–1959' ('Ranajit Guha in Intelligence Branch archives, 1947–1959'), *Anushtup*, 57 (2023), p. 898.

[47]Ranajit Guha, *A rule of property for Bengal: an essay on the idea of permanent settlement* (Paris, 1963).

[48]Ranajit Guha, 'Preface (2nd edition)', in *Ranajit Guha rachanasangraha*, vol. I, p. 95.

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colonial-origin forms of big private property, and had thus become a neocolonial state. For many Bengali refugees, capitalism explained this continuity. In seeking to violently protect big private property from the impoverished multitudes, a capitalist state would necessarily become authoritarian. The remorseless logic of capitalism would transform a postcolonial state into a neocolonial one.

Ranajit Guha viewed peasant rebellions as key sites of intellectual production. He argued that here were born 'the elements of a consciousness which was learning to compile and classify the individual and disparate moments of experience and organize these into some sort of generalizations. These were, in other words, the very beginnings of a theoretical consciousness.'[49] I read refugee assemblies in a similar manner. It is through these militant deliberations that a precocious theoretical analysis emerged of the postcolonial state as a neocolonial capitalist state.

Intelligence Branch archives help us map the public birth of this class analysis. Already in January 1949, posters were pasted at the R. G. Kar Medical College in Calcutta declaring that Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was 'the leader of the people before August 1947. But he is now leader of the Capitalists. … Congress police is an imperialist (*samrajyavadi*) police.' The posters laconically commented on this reversal: 'Jawaharlal was our leader. Jawaharlal is not our leader.'[50] A leaflet circulated in Calcutta the same month, condemning the Congress government for attacking refugee marches (*bastuhara shobhayatri*) with police and military forces. It advocated 'resistance struggle' (*pratirodh andolan*) in the bloodied streets against the 'fascist domination' (*fascist damananiti*) of the state.[51] A meeting of the All Bengal Bastuhara Karma Parishad, held on 18 December 1949 at Hazra Park, Calcutta, and attended by about a hundred and fifty people, 'bitterly criticized the Government for its capitalistic outlook and ignoring the causes of the refugees'.[52]

The Delegates' Sessions of the United Central Refugees' Conference was organized in Calcutta on 12 August 1950. About five hundred delegates from nearly three hundred refugee organizations were present in the mega-assembly. These included a large number of female delegates from the Ganatantrik Nari Sangha and the Ganatantrik Chhatri Sangha. The Intelligence Branch report observed about the speakers:

> Hurling usual criticism against the Congress and the Muslim League, described as the stooges of the British imperialism, they stated that the solution lay in the unity of the refugees of both India and Pakistan and the common people of both the countries in their demand to overthrow the capitalist order.[53]

[49]Guha, *Elementary aspects*, p. 11.

[50]WBSA, IB. I was not authorized to give file name and number here.

[51]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 23 Jan. 1949, WBSA, IB, WR.

[52]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 25 Dec. 1949, WBSA, IB, WR.

[53]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 20 Aug. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

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When the third anniversary of India's independence came, on 15 August 1950, refugee activists dismantled the chronology of decolonization. About five hundred refugees from different colonies in Calcutta assembled to 'decry the Congress Government for the allegedly faked independence achieved'.[54]

Refugee assemblies now regularly denounced the postcolonial state as a tool of Western imperialism. During a meeting of about a thousand refugees in Dhubulia camp in Nadia district on 1 November 1950, the speakers suggested that

> this imperialist government is not ready to antagonize the zamindars. The Congress did not agree to partition beforehand, but being swayed away by the lure of high posts, Jawaharlal and Liaquat Ali agreed to partition of Bengal at the dictates of the British. Thus they played the part of Mirzaffar of Plassey.

The reference here was to the Mughal nobleman Mir Zafar, who betrayed the Indian forces in 1757, allowing the British to conquer Bengal. Expanding this logic, Arabinda Bose argued: 'The British power scented danger and in order to keep their exploitation intact, they brought in communal disturbances … and as a result the country was vivisected.' Bose insinuated that Nehru colluded with Governor-General Lord Mountbatten (1900–79) and his wife to protect British commercial interests, to the detriment of the Indian masses.[55]

When Nehru toured Calcutta in mid-January 1949, pamphlets circulated the following argument: 'The mass movement which was able to drive away the British Imperialism from India was temporarily suspended during the Congress repression. … This Government was stepping into the shoes of the British. … The refugees should therefore organize themselves in each camp with a view to launching a struggle.'[56] A report published in the newspaper *Naya Duniya*, on 15 January 1949, critiqued Nehru's political theology. Nehru had addressed Calcuttans on the previous day at the Brigade Parade Ground. Confronted with opposition, the prime minister had preached about Buddhist ideals of love (*prema*) and nonviolence (*ahimsa*), while presiding over a ceremony to hand over relics of the Buddha to the Calcutta Mahabodhi Society. Simultaneously, the police had opened fire on refugee marches, killing two and injuring ten refugees. Drawing on Karl Marx's description of religion as 'the opium of the people' in his *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of right'* (1843), the newspaper concluded that Nehru's invocation of Buddhist pacifism was only opium, intended to subdue popular rebellion (*gana-vikshobha*). Nehru claimed to be the divine 'dispenser of the destiny' of India (*bhagyavidhata*) celebrated in the Indian national anthem, but he was, in fact, a violent imperialist who preferred the company of the British to those of the Indian poor.[57]

Historians generally agree that the Indian state treated Bengali refugees with more indifference than it treated refugees in the Punjab, which neighboured

[54]Ibid.

[55]Report on the activities of refugees in Nadia district, WBSA, IB. I was not authorized to give the file number.

[56]Reports on the activities of refugees, WBSA, IB. I was not authorized to give the file name and number.

[57]Ibid. On the ceremony, see Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The return of the Buddha: ancient symbols for a new nation* (Delhi, 2014), p. 121.

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the national capital in Delhi and received more of the central state's attention. Haimanti Roy thus observes that, in east Punjab, the state co-operated with 'refugee dynamism', granting lands and agricultural aid to Punjabi refugees. In contrast, while 'Bengali refugees were equally enterprising and creative, their actions were largely directed towards self-rehabilitation in the absence of any matching effort on the part of the Indian state. The failure of rehabilitation in West Bengal was thus a failure of the state.'[58] I agree with this assessment of state failure, and would add that underlying this failure was a fundamental gulf in West Bengal between statist ideas of limited top-down largesse, and refugee aspirations for egalitarian restructuring of society, economy, and polity.

III

The previous section offered a grassroots approach to comprehend why many Bengalis began to see the postcolonial Indian state as a neocolonial capitalist state. I shall now switch scale to transnational high politics.

Recent historical scholarship has emphasized that political decolonization did not automatically entail economic decolonization. Paul McGarr has shown how India retained close economic ties with Britain and the wider Commonwealth: 'In 1949–50, a quarter of India's total imports came from the United Kingdom, while the British market absorbed a similar level of India's exports.' The British presence in eastern India, particularly West Bengal, remained pervasive. 'Up until the late 1960s, India's tea, mining and oil refining industries remained largely British-controlled concerns. In Calcutta, much of the city's infrastructure, including its electricity supply and public transport system, was owned and operated by private companies based in London.' India also depended on Britain for military training and equipment. The British security service worked closely with its Indian counterpart, conducting 'counter-espionage operations directed against the Communist Party of India'.[59]

There were no comparable ties linking India with the Soviet Union. David Engerman shows that, following India's independence, the 'only progress in formal relations was a bilateral trade deal that amounted to barter: Indian jute and tea in exchange for Soviet grain. Neither the exchange of ambassadors in 1947 nor small quantities of goods two years later warmed Soviet attitudes toward India.'[60] McGarr argues that, until 'Joseph Stalin's death in 1953, the USSR's relationship with South Asia was inhibited by the Soviet dictator's conviction that nascent post-colonial states were little more than imperialist puppets'.[61] Robert McMahon concludes that Nehru reciprocated the distaste for Stalinist Russia. Communist 'domestic challenges, combined with vicious Soviet propaganda attacks on Indian neutralism and persistent pressures on Indian diplomats to choose sides in the East–West struggle, angered Nehru and fueled his mounting distrust of Moscow'.[62] One could be forgiven

[58]Haimanti Roy, *The Partition of India* (Delhi, 2018), p. 112.
[59]McGarr, *The Cold War*, pp. 25–8.
[60]Engerman, *The price of aid*, p. 43.
[61]McGarr, *The Cold War*, p. 30.
[62]McMahon, *The Cold War*, pp. 45–6.

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for assuming, as Bengali refugees did, that the Indian state was allied to the Western bloc.

In the era of the Cold War, opponents of the Indian state naturally turned to the communist bloc. Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and other Soviet leaders met the leader of the CPI, S. A. Dange (1899–1991), on 16 August 1947, just a day after India's independence. Zhdanov and Dange intensely discussed South Asian politics, as well as the role of the Congress in keeping India subservient to the Anglo-American imperialist bloc. They agreed that communists should facilitate popular anti-imperialism. Zhdanov concluded: 'In India there are forces that are stronger than the forces dividing her, and if the communist party succeeds in leading these forces into a movement, then the democratic proletarian movement will be invincible.' The two met again on 6 September.[63] On 22 September, Zhdanov delivered his celebrated speech to the Cominform, outlining a vision of bipolar conflict between the Communist and Western blocs, with communists representing the anti-imperialist camp. 'Indonesia and Vietnam are associated with it; it has the sympathy of India, Egypt and Syria.' Conveying a standpoint similar to Dange's, Zhdanov affirmed that Western imperialism was trying to keep India in bondage.[64]

This Zhdanov doctrine (*zhdanovshchina*) led the CPI to adopt the Ranadive line, named after B. T. Ranadive (1904–90), general secretary of the CPI from 1948 to 1950. It advocated violent revolution against the Indian state. The party officially adopted this programme in February 1948, at the Second Party Congress in Calcutta. In the late 1940s, popular revolutions had broken out across India, including, notably, in the princely states of Hyderabad and Tripura. These revolutions had autonomous origins. But the revolutionaries now allied with the Communist party and looked to the Soviet bloc for support against the Indian state.[65]

In West Bengal, the Communist party blessed refugee militancy with the argument that 'forcible occupation of land' by refugees 'amounted to establishing liberated zones'. A natural alliance emerged between refugee politics and Communist politics, with a shared grammar of anti-capitalist political thought. Party members increasingly guided and nourished refugee politics. Refugee activists were further emboldened by a Soviet journal article, published in 1950, which condemned the Partition as a manoeuvre of the 'imperialist forces' and 'reactionary communal elements'.[66] Refugee politics in West Bengal thus unfolded as a local subaltern iteration of the global Cold War.

[63]'Record of meetings between S. A. Dange and Soviet leaders in 1947', in Purabi Roy, Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, and Hari Vasudevan, eds., *Indo-Russian relations, 1917–1947: select documents from the archives of the Russian Federation*, vol. II (Calcutta, 2000), pp. 348–58.

[64]'Zhdanov on the international situation', *Seventeen moments in Soviet history*, https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1947-2/cold-war/cold-war-texts/zhdanov-on-the-international-situation/ (accessed 12 June 2023).

[65]Harihar Bhattacharyya, *Radical politics and governance in India's north east: the case of Tripura* (Abingdon, 2018); Sunil Purushotham, *From Raj to republic: sovereignty, violence, and democracy in India* (Stanford, CA, 2021); Milinda Banerjee, 'A non-Eurocentric genealogy of Indian democracy: Tripura in history of political thought', in Jelle J. P. Wouters, ed., *Vernacular politics in Northeast India: democracy, ethnicity, and indigeneity* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 83–109.

[66]Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 62–75.

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Many Bengali refugees began to see their local struggles as recreations of the Russian Revolution. Thus, an Intelligence Branch report noted that, in 1950, in Nadia district, 'November Day was observed in Chandmari refugee camp … Speeches were delivered explaining the significance of the Day and people were urged to become members of the Party and follow the doctrines of Lenin to overthrow the present capitalist Government by mass revolution.'[67] As the Cold War intensified in Asia, refugee radicals knew where their sympathies lay. In December 1950, Ambica Chakrabartti, secretary of the United Central Refugee Council (UCRC), 'appealed to all the allied refugee organizations to organize meetings and demonstrations with the local peace committees to mobilize public opinion against American aggression in Korea. He also urged them to collect as many peace campaign signatures as possible so that anti-war agitation can be strong and effective.'[68]

The Yugoslav communist leader and thinker Edvard Kardelj (1910–79) inspired the Bengali refugee conviction that the Congress was an ally of imperialist forces, and hence democracy could only be deepened through a socialist revolution directed against it.[69] Even more importantly, in October 1949, Mao Zedong (1893–1976) proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Some Indian communists, including Bengali representatives, travelled to revolutionary China and met with leaders such as Mao and Liu Shaoqi (1898–1969).[70] Communist China directly inspired refugee republicanism. Drawing on Mao's slogan 'from the masses and to the masses', Liu had outlined in *On the party* (1945) that 'the organizational and political line of our Party should stem genuinely from the masses and be genuinely relayed back to them'. This text circulated in Bengali refugee circles. For Anil Sinha, 'the prime mover within the UCRC', the text 'defined rules that could guide the UCRC'.[71] It provided a template for connecting refugee camp and colony committees, elected by adult members, to the central organization of the UCRC. As the refugee scholar Prafulla Chakrabarti noted, this framework fostered 'the organizational form of a direct democracy'.[72]

In the late 1940s, the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) was one of the principal women's international platforms with pro-communist sympathies. Founded in 1945 and originally headquartered in Paris, it shifted to East Berlin in 1951. As a pioneer global platform for anti-imperialist women's solidarity, the WIDF inspired Bengali refugee women.[73] As the Bengali refugee communist activist

[67]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 26 Nov. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[68]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 17 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[69]Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, p. 69; Sen, *A traveller*, p. 39.

[70]Sen, *A traveller*, pp. 77–113; Gita Bandyopadhyay, *Moscow theke Chin* (*From Moscow to China*) (Calcutta, 1952).

[71]Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*, pp. 77–8.

[72]Ibid., p. 47.

[73]Katharine McGregor, 'Opposing colonialism: the Women's International Democratic Federation and decolonisation struggles in Vietnam and Algeria, 1945–1965', *Women's History Review*, 25 (2016), pp. 925–44; Elisabeth B. Armstrong, *Bury the corpse of colonialism: the revolutionary feminist conference of 1949* (Oakland, CA, 2023).

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Manikuntala Sen (1911–87) recalled, refugee women experienced 'a strange renaissance' (*ekta adbhut navajagaran*) in this era. They were keen to gain education and employment to support their families, and became teachers, nurses, and clerks.[74] But they also built women's *samitis* or associations in refugee colonies, ensuring that 'every colony became a fortress of the revolution (*sangramer durga*)'.[75] All colony women became members of these *samitis* and organized regular public assemblies (*sadharan sabha ba sammelan*). Sen recalls that refugee men enthusiastically joined these gatherings, recognizing women as comrades.[76] Eugénie Cotton (1881–1967), a French socialist, women's rights advocate, and the WIDF's first president, congratulated Sen, appreciating the work of these women's organizations.[77] Bengali refugee women's politics thus coalesced here as a local form of Cold War-era socialist women's activism.[78]

Since the nineteenth century, Bengali intellectuals and politicians had been profound observers of global politics. They looked to Britain, France, Germany, and Italy for templates for creating an Indian nation-state. Interwar-era Bengalis also looked to Japan, the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Union, the United States, Iran, Iraq, China, and Southeast Asia for inspiration. They were stirred by pan-Asianism, pan-Islamism, and global communism. To get rid of British rule, to form new national and transnational political frameworks, to reform the economy and redistribute material resources, Bengali actors knew they would have to learn from societies which were pursuing innovative experiments in social engineering.[79] As inheritors of more than a century of transnational political thinking, it is natural that Bengali refugees would draw lessons from world politics to shape their insurgency.

Among Bengali refugees, international communist vocabularies of radical democracy resonated with pre-existing local and vernacular political frameworks. During the anti-colonial struggle, Indian intellectuals and politicians, from Rammohun Roy (1772/4–1833) to Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), had invoked the *panchayat* ideal to demand democratic devolution of power to local communities. The *panchayat* model encompassed actual and mythohistorical traditions of village self-governance.[80] Bengali intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) drew on radical traditions of rural self-governance in the Russian empire, including among Armenians

[74]Manikuntala Sen, *Sediner katha* (*Stories of those times*) (Calcutta, 1982), p. 183.

[75]Ibid., p. 184.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Ibid., pp. 230–6.

[78]On Cold War-era socialist women's activism, see Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, second sex: socialist women's activism and global solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, NC, 2018); Celia Donert, ed., 'Women's rights and global socialism: gendering socialist internationalism during the Cold War', special issue, *International Review of Social History*, 67 (2022).

[79]Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in global concept history: culturalism in the age of capital* (Chicago, IL, 2008); C. A. Bayly, *Recovering liberties: Indian thought in the age of liberalism and empire* (Cambridge, 2011); Kris Manjapra, *Age of entanglement: German and Indian intellectuals across empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); Banerjee, *Mortal god*.

[80]Milinda Banerjee, '"All this is indeed Brahman": Rammohun Roy and a "global" history of the rights-bearing self', *Asian Review of World Histories*, 3 (2015), pp. 81–112, at p. 99; James Jaffe, *The ironies of colonial governance: law, custom, and justice in colonial India* (Cambridge, 2015).

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and Georgians, alongside the *panchayat* tradition.[81] In postcolonial West Bengal, too, Bengali refugees fondly remembered and idealized village democracy. For example, a refugee recalled how, in his village in East Bengal, 'under the large *bakul* tree would convene the village parliament. Under the *bakul* tree would go on deliberations, debates, judicial proceedings, and lawgiving. Police had never entered our village. The people of this area would never go to court.'[82]

This tradition of state-avoiding, if not state-critical, self-government received a new fillip in refugee settlements. Thus, in mid-1950, leaflets circulated in Nadia district calling 'for the formation of a Panchayat in order to fight the cause of the refugees'.[83] In a meeting of about a hundred and fifty people organized by the North Calcutta Refugee Rehabilitation Committee on 6 October 1950 at Ultadanga Maidan, 'refugees were advised to form Udbastu Panchayet in every refugee colony'.[84] The *panchayat* tradition thus dovetailed with international communist vocabularies of collective self-governance. Nurtured by such traditions, Bengali refugees showed little affinity for Stalinist or Maoist-style authoritarianism. When the Left Front coalition finally assumed the reins of government in West Bengal in 1977, it made the *panchayat* system the cornerstone of rural democracy and decentralized governance.[85]

During the 1950s and 1960s, as the Indian state allied with the Soviet Union, the CPI gradually lost its subversive edge. It emphasized quiet parliamentarianism and reform over revolution. Hence, radical communists, many of whom were East Bengali refugees, seceded to form the CPI (Marxist) in 1964, and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) in 1969. They admired Maoist China more than the Soviet Union. They synthesized Bengali refugee (and) peasant traditions of non-state self-governance. The Naxalite movement, spearheaded by the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) during the late 1960s and early 1970s, regarded peasant communes as the bedrock of Indian revolution. They were strong in rural West Bengal, where peasants occupied landlord estates and established 'liberated villages'. Naxalites condemned Western 'imperialism' and Soviet 'social imperialism' for being pillars of capitalism and for economically and militarily supporting exploitative states and ruling classes across Asia and Africa, transforming these regions into 'neo-colonies'. They expressed solidarity with anti-imperialist and revolutionary movements in Asia (above all in Vietnam), Africa, and Latin America; with anti-Soviet dissident movements in eastern Europe; and with the African American civil rights movement. They suggested that these democratic struggles would destroy the capitalist world system.[86]

[81]Rabindranath Tagore, 'Avastha o vyavastha' ('Condition and settlement') (1905), in *Rabindrarachanabali* (*Collected writings of Rabindranath Tagore*) (Calcutta, 1990), pp. 97–101.

[82]Dakshina Ranjan Basu, ed., *Chhere asha gram* (*The village left behind*), vol. I (Calcutta, 1953), p. 55.

[83]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 4 June 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[84]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 29 Oct. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[85]Sonali Chakravarti Banerjee, *Social background of panchayat leaders in West Bengal* (Calcutta, 2002); Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, *Government as practice: democratic left in a transforming India* (Cambridge, 2016).

[86]Milinda Banerjee, '"We shall create a new world, a new man, a new society": globalized horizons among Bengali Naxalites', in Tamara Chaplin and Jadwiga E. Pieper Mooney, eds., *The global 1960s: convention, contest and counterculture* (London, 2017), pp. 52–71.

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The Subaltern Studies intellectual tradition emerged from this landscape. Ranajit Guha was in close contact with Naxalite revolutionaries and sympathized with their ideals. Guha, Partha Chatterjee (b. 1947), and Dipesh Chakrabarty (b. 1948) were all of East Bengali refugee background. In their writings, from the 1970s to the early 1990s, we see the convergence of East Bengali refugee and broader Indian socialist thinking about peasant and working-class communities as the antithesis of exploitative states and capitalism.[87]

Returning to the immediate postcolonial years, I should add that Bengali refugees also routinely deployed terms like *sabha* and *samiti* to define their assemblies. Both terms were widespread in ancient India, and had been resurrected by modern Indian nationalists. Thus, in a meeting held on 25 November 1950 at Birendranagar refugee colony in Murshidabad district, and attended by about a hundred people from different colonies, it 'was resolved to form refugee Samitis in every police station and subdivision'.[88] In a meeting in Dhubulia camp in Nadia district that year, refugees lamented their loss of 'culture, ideals, even humanity' (*krishti, adarsha, emanki manushyatva*). To overcome this, they desired to congregate (*sanghabaddha*) and elect representatives (*pratinidhi*) from every refugee camp and colony, announcing their presence through 'public assemblies' (*prakashya janasabha*).[89]

Bengali refugees insisted on elaborate forms of political representation. They made regular 'appeals to the refugees to form joint committees … in all camps'.[90] In the confederal organization of the UCRC, 'Representatives of different refugee camps, colonies, and relief organizations were elected as members of the sub-committees.'[91] The logic of representation stemmed, in part, from the necessity of organizing revolutionary violence. As a meeting of the Sanjukta Bastuhara Committee, held on 17 December 1950 in Calcutta, observed:

> Members representing different camps and colonies of 24 Parganas and Calcutta were enlightened on the necessity of re-constituting the existing executive bodies of every camp and colony so that they can select men for fighting out their common grievances successfully. They were also exhorted to organize a group of volunteers in each unit who could forcibly occupy fallow lands and stubbornly resist eviction.[92]

[87]Milinda Banerjee, 'Subaltern politics and the question of being: an interview with Ranajit Guha', 2022, https://www.jhiblog.org/2022/07/18/subaltern-politics-and-the-question-of-being-an-interview-with-ranajit-guha/ (accessed 22 June 2024); Ranajit Guha special issue, *Anushtup*, 57 (2023); Milinda Banerjee, 'Ranajit Guha: a thinker of revolutionary being', *Development and Change*, 55 (2024), pp. 892–909.

[88]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 17 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[89]Report on the activities of refugees in Nadia district, WBSA, IB. I was not authorized to give the file number.

[90]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 23 Jan. 1949, WBSA, IB, WR.

[91]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 2 July 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[92]Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 31 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

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In the late 1940s, East Bengali refugees did not fundamentally worry about their citizenship status. They regarded the Indian state as the legal heir of British India, with a concomitant responsibility to ensure the citizenship status of its residents. However, as the postcolonial Indian state began to consolidate its citizenship law and electoral roll, worries emerged that the government would not include fresh waves of refugees from East Pakistan in its citizen list. This would exclude them from voting rights in the general election of 1951–2. Refugee activists presented this as a negation of democracy.[93]

Hence, from the second half of 1950, regular protests emerged around the citizenship issue across West Bengal. For example, a meeting held on 11 July 1950 at Cossimbazar Manindranagar Colony, and attended by members from different refugee colonies of Murshidabad district, declared: 'This Assembly demands the right of casting of votes of each refugee in the impending election and protests the Government action in depriving of the right of casting of votes by the refugees.'[94] A meeting at the Burdwan town hall on 10 December 1950, which was attended by about three hundred refugees, denounced 'the undemocratic attitude of the Congress leaders', since 'it was against the concept of a free people in any progressive country to deprive such a huge number of people from exercising their basic rights of freedom'.[95] Mrinal Kanti Khastagir, general secretary of the United Central Refugee Council of Action, embodied the general ethos when he castigated Congress politicians as 'so-called leaders, championing the cause of modern democracy', who were, in fact, 'quite indifferent to the prevailing public opinion of according rights of franchise to the refugees in the next election'.[96] Refugee democracy, with its spirit of inclusive confederal solidarity, stood opposed, in this argument, to the sham democracy of the postcolonial state with its exclusionary electoral rolls.

IV

Up to this point, we have considered the purely human aspects of refugee politics and thought. However, it is worth emphasizing that refugee conceptualization of economic categories – money, wage, price, or indeed capitalism – emerged from a fundamental alienation from wider nature. In East Bengal, land had never been a merely economic fact. Despite the British colonial state instituting the Permanent Settlement and introducing absolute property, land market, and commercial agriculture across Bengal, older forms of non-commodity land relations still persisted.[97]

[93] Ornit Shani, *How India became democratic: citizenship and the making of the universal franchise* (Cambridge, 2017).

[94] 'Translation of Refugee Central Rehabilitation Committee, P. O. Khagra, Murshidabad, 14 July 1950', WBSA, IB. I was not authorized to give file name and number here.

[95] Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 24 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[96] Report on the political activities of refugees and corruption in the refugee camps for the week ending 31 Dec. 1950, WBSA, IB, WR.

[97] On colonial-era agrarian capitalism, see Sugata Bose, *Peasant labour and colonial capital: rural Bengal since 1770* (Cambridge, 1993); Sartori, *Liberalism in empire*; Tariq Omar Ali, *A local history of global capital: jute and peasant life in the Bengal delta* (Princeton, NJ, 2018).

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Ownership of land entailed a web of social and ecological relationships – hierarchical forms of mutual interdependence – linking Hindu villagers of different castes to their Muslim neighbours and to nonhuman beings, including cattle, birds, trees, and rivers. Refugee memoirs universally lamented the violent sundering of these relationships.

A vital source for understanding this alienation is a collection of essays, published in the newspaper *Jugantar* from 1950 onwards, and later collated as two volumes, *Chhere asha gram* (*The village left behind*, 1953 and 1959). *Jugantar* was 'a popular Bengali newspaper claiming to serve 55,000 households'.[98] These essays embodied conversations between Dakshina Ranjan Basu, the compiler and editor, and anonymous refugees, who were probably high- or middle-caste Hindus.[99]

A former resident of Savar's recollection of the monsoon is typical. The serpent goddess Manasa was worshipped across East Bengal in this season. The verse epic *Manasamangal* celebrated her and the human couple Behula and Lakhindar. As the rains flooded low-lying paddy fields, the epic came alive: 'A raft is gently floating on the waters. The *tal* forest ended. Only water lay ahead. But Behula did not tremble.' For the narrator, poetry arose from the inundated lands, serpents, and trees. Working-class Muslims like Chhabedali Bepari shared in this poetry and wept with it, embracing the plight of the widowed Behula. 'Hindus and Muslims were equal sharers (*saman sharik*) of this song.' Bereft of this manifestation of nature, the author felt like an exile (*nirbasita*) in West Bengal. 'Society (*samaj*) was destroyed, family and household (*ghar-samsar*) were destroyed.' The narrator remained haunted by East Bengal's amphibious nature, saying that the river 'Dhaleshvari beckons me in dreams, calls me again and again – come, come, come'.[100]

A former resident of Dhamgarh recalled the song that a Muslim boatman Rasul always sang while starting his boat:

> O teacher, for how long shall there be distance between us
> I cannot see you,
> How much grief have I borne on this earth
> There is no writing to measure that.

Across Bengal, popular music arose from working-class communities. Poetry was a palliative for labour. Music structured work's rhythms. Workers, through their music, transformed labour into more than a site of exploitation. For the exiled narrator, this music embodied the lost land. 'I often think today of devotional songs sung by the baritone voice of Rasul the boatman. The sound of his oars on River Shitalakshya transported me to another world. … Though my heart suffers from separation, there is no return to that cursed country.'[101]

[98]Haimanti Roy, *Partitioned lives: migrants, refugees, citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947–65* (Delhi, 2012), p. 168.

[99]Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of modernity: essays in the wake of subaltern studies* (Chicago, IL, 2002), pp. 115–48.

[100]Basu, ed., *Chhere asha gram*, vol. I, pp. 16, 20–1.

[101]Ibid., p. 42.

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Rural production subsisted on communal labour and hospitality. For a former resident of Sonarang village, this collective agrarian labour also gave birth to poetry and ritual. In the dry season, young and elderly villagers went round the village, caking their bodies with mud and water to imitate rain-drenched fields. They sang to the queen of clouds (*megharani*) to send rain. 'That incantation was infallible. Cloud, rain, and storm would come like mad elephants.' Emigration to West Bengal meant alienation from this peasant community poetry.[102] An exile from Baroghar village yearned for lost mates by remembering songs that village herdsmen sang to their human and buffalo companions.[103] An exile from Mahilara longed for the Nabanna harvest festival, when villagers invited humans, animals, and birds to their homes.

O jungle crow, o house crow,
Auspicious Nabanna is in our home,
All of you there go.
With rice, banana, sweets, jaggery,
Fill to the brim your belly.[104]

V

While British colonial rule had gradually destroyed many traditional forms of land-based social relations, the Partition dealt a swifter death blow to these relations simply by uprooting millions of people of various castes and classes from their agrarian life. It dispossessed these people of their means of agrarian production, and subjected them, rapidly and brutally, to pure wage-labour and money economy. 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away.'[105] Hence, East Bengali refugees confronted the categories of political economy – wage-work, money, price, commodity – as markers of heteronomy, remembrances of alienation. They conceptualized these nakedly alienated relationships as capitalism. They identified the political protector of this economy, the postcolonial state, as a capitalist and imperialist foe. Refugee revolt was a rebellion against this leviathan.

Forcibly displaced by a majoritarian Muslim state, why did these refugees not become Hindu nationalists? Joya Chatterji has argued that the Hindu Mahasabha, which had articulated Hindu minority anxieties in Muslim-majority colonial Bengal (especially eastern Bengal), lost its *raison d'être* in Hindu-majority West Bengal. Further, it prioritized middle-class refugees, alienating subaltern-caste and subaltern-class refugees.[106]

In contrast, drawing lessons from Soviet and Chinese communist politics and from the Yugoslav and French left, socialism-inspired East Bengali refugees adroitly built a confederal republicanism, connecting democratically elected camp and colony assemblies to an overarching organization, the UCRC. This was a grand

[102]Ibid., p. 81.
[103]Ibid., p. 111.
[104]Ibid., pp. 176–7.
[105]Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Communist manifesto* (Chicago, IL, 1910; orig. German edn 1848), p. 16.
[106]Chatterji, *The spoils of Partition*, pp. 261–75.

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'refugee polis' – a democracy formed from below, rather than imposed from above by elite statesmen and administrators. Intelligence Branch archives reveal that, while many refugee leaders were high-caste Hindu men, refugee politics involved people from diverse caste, class, and gender backgrounds. This is clear from the surnames recorded in the archives, and – more importantly – from the demands that refugees made for agricultural, fishing, and craft tools. The refugee polis comprised displaced high-caste literate gentry as well as subaltern-caste peasants, fisherfolk, and artisans, united in a momentary alliance against their common enemies – the state and the landed magnates. Their cross-class coalition politics resembles the Jewish refugee organizations in Australia described by Philipp Strobl or the Indian National Army and Faridabad refugee settlements described by Shuvatri Dasgupta in this special issue. In subsequent decades, as high-caste refugees acquired property and jobs more successfully than subaltern-caste refugees, the latter kept alive the conviction that true freedom could only be achieved through redistribution of land and other means of production.[107]

Bengali refugee radicals saw themselves as socialist warriors fighting not just to capture land and other means of production but also to defeat national and international forces of Western capitalist imperialism. However, they were never puppets of the Soviet Union or China. They drew on Cold War rivalries to forge their own autonomous politics. As Vikrant Dadawala suggests, actors 'in the former Third World often had their own ideas of what was at stake in the Cold War – rather than being "tricked" or "played" by a foreign agency'.[108] Cold War scholarship is gradually but increasingly becoming conscious of this reality.

Bengali refugee political thought may, therefore, be contextualized within wider global intellectual histories of anti-capitalist economic imaginary in the era of the Cold War.[109] A subaltern history of the Cold War, as exemplified here, demonstrates how Cold War-era political, economic, and ideological contestations radically expanded subaltern visions of politics, and nourished local democratic struggles. It forces us to theorize the global Cold War itself as comprising innumerable dialectical relations between local struggles and international rivalries. In the case of India, subaltern actors like the Bengali refugees took a firm position in the Cold War – politically aligning with the Soviet Union and China against the United States and Britain – ahead of elite statesmen like Jawaharlal Nehru. Arguably, even as the Indian state vacillated on whether to throw in its lot with the Western powers or the Soviet bloc, it was popular actors like these who forcefully drew Indian political battles into the global amphitheatre and charged rhetoric of the Cold War. Whereas Bengali refugees were already unequivocally siding with the communist bloc in the late 1940s, the Nehruvian regime would, ambivalently and haltingly, orient towards

[107]Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Chaudhury, *Caste and partition*; Milinda Banerjee, 'The Partition of India, Bengali "new Jews", and refugee democracy: transnational horizons of Indian refugee political discourse', *Itinerario: Journal of Imperial and Global Interactions*, 46 (2022), pp. 283–303.

[108]Dadawala, 'War, famine, and newsprint', p. 202.

[109]See, for example, Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after empire: the rise and fall of self-determination* (Princeton, NJ, 2019); Charisse Burden-Stelly and Jodi Dean, eds., *Organize, fight, win: black communist women's political writing* (London, 2022); Emmanuel Kwaku Akyeampong, *Independent Africa: the first generation of nation builders* (Bloomington, IN, 2023); Armstrong, *Bury the corpse*.

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the Soviet bloc only in the 1950s. In this sense, and to be just slightly provocative, we may speak about the subaltern origins of the Cold War in India.

Bengali refugees were precocious in realizing that the postcolonial state had betrayed the heritage of anti-colonialism – that decolonization had been incomplete. Some historians argue that the Congress was hegemonic in early postcolonial India, and indeed established Indian democracy through the constitution and regular elections.[110] Many Bengalis would have disagreed. Sekhar Bandyopadhyay notes that the Congress won only 38.49 per cent of votes in West Bengal during the 1951–2 Assembly elections. Taking into account the whole electorate, 'only 22.64 per cent of the adult citizens in the province had actually expressed their confidence in the Congress by registering their votes in its favour'. Despite massive repression, the Communist party came second, winning 11.13 per cent of votes.[111] Refugee protests, in conjunction with wider peasant and working-class discontent, steadily eroded Congress hegemony in the state over the next decades, paving the way for the communist coalition Left Front to capture power in 1977. The Congress thereafter ceased to be a major player in the region.[112]

West Bengal was precocious but not exceptional. The late 1940s saw widespread opposition to the Congress regime across India, from Kashmir in the north, through Nagaland and Tripura in the north-east, to Telangana in the south. 'Between 1947 and 1949, there were 3990 strikes.'[113] The state remorselessly and violently suppressed these rebellions, albeit with uneven success. In the 1951–2 elections, the Congress captured only 42.4 per cent of the votes polled at state level, and 45 per cent at national level.[114] Clearly, less than half of India's electorate believed in Jawaharlal Nehru's regime. If the Congress was to rule India, that was due as much to the Westminster first-past-the-post electoral system that privileged dominant parties over proportional representation – their power buttressed by the coercive apparatuses of army and police – as to the consent of the populace.[115] In many parts of India, from Kohima to Kadavendi, Congress rule exemplified dominance without hegemony.[116]

Many other postcolonial states across Asia and Africa had comparable or more bitter experiences. Confronting popular opposition, they degenerated into authoritarian regimes. As in India, these regimes often depended on American or Soviet military and economic support. Indian Naxalite peasants, Zambian mineworkers, Zimbabwean revolutionaries, and many other plebeian actors, as well as intellectuals, therefore argued that the postcolonial state was becoming a subordinate partner

[110]Shani, *How India became democratic*; Rohit De, *A people's constitution: the everyday life of law in the Indian republic* (Princeton, NJ, 2018); Madhav Khosla, *India's founding moment: the constitution of a most surprising democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2020).

[111]Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia*, pp. 174–5.

[112]Chakrabarti, *The marginal men*.

[113]Purushotham, *From Raj to republic*, p. 195.

[114]Bandyopadhyay, *Decolonization in South Asia*, p. 175.

[115]Many Indians have criticized this system. For the Naga rejection, see Jelle J. P. Wouters, 'Nagas as a "society against voting?": consensus-building, party-less politics and a culturalist critique of elections in northeast India', *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, 36 (2018), pp. 113–32.

[116]Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without hegemony: history and power in colonial India* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

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of American or Soviet imperialism.[117] Following their arguments, one detects a general tragic metamorphosis. In seeking to protect big business and landed estates, and in helping ruling classes to extract value from labouring communities, postcolonial polities had seamlessly transitioned into neocolonial states. They acted as subordinate partners of white imperial powers in maintaining the capitalist order – whether in the form of conventional private sector capitalism, or of Soviet-style state capitalism, or (as in India) of a 'mixed economy' based on both.[118] Decolonization was thus betrayed.

Ultimately, Bengali refugees help us realize that the postcolonial state does not exhaust the possibilities of anti-colonial freedom. They show us that the only path to emancipation lies through building and sustaining political communities. Democracy is collective life. The true polis – like the refugee polis – is formed from below, through struggles waged by the multitudes, rather than bestowed from above as a gift of elite statesmen, bureaucrats, or constitutional experts. Bengali refugees teach us about the necessity of connecting local democratic assemblies to global alliances and battles, to accomplish the unfinished task of decolonization. They strengthen in us the conviction that we can rebuild popular democracy from below, in opposition to neocolonial state and capital.[119] What was once possible, can once more be. History is future.

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[117]André Astrow, *Zimbabwe: a revolution that lost its way?* (London, 1983); Miles Larmer, *Mineworkers in Zambia: labour and political change in post-colonial Africa* (London, 2007); Banerjee, 'Globalized horizons among Bengali Naxalites'.

[118]On these variants of capitalism, see Moishe Postone, *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx's critical theory* (Cambridge, 1993).

[119]Milinda Banerjee and Jelle J. P. Wouters, *Subaltern studies 2.0: being against the Capitalocene* (Chicago, IL, 2022).

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