

# Indian Response to Early Western Contacts in Bengal, 1650-1756

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At their first landing, they [Europeans] looked like harmless marine animalculae of a previously unknown breed; soon they revealed themselves, by their aggressive behaviour, to be savage sea-monsters; and finally they proved to be predatory amphibians, who, unhappily for mankind, were as mobile on dry land as in their own element.<sup>1</sup>

[Indian] people were not yet [*ca.* 1750] united by nationalism . . . there was none of the criss-cross of groups such as in western countries have existed to promote various objectives of the community as a whole. The towns, though often magnificent, never produced a bourgeoisie with a will for power over the entire community. There was no feudal system providing a social bond.<sup>2</sup>

Since the sixteenth century the impact of the West upon the Indian society has come to be a paramount political force. The failure of the Indian society to respond creatively and adequately to the challenge of the West in the eighteenth century is now past history. It was not only to the superior western technology that the Indians succumbed. They failed also because without national and social unity they were an impotent people before a corporation that had unity of purpose and boldness to execute its aims.

Indians and Europeans, despite the misleading term "Indo-European," have hardly ever felt racial affinities. They are peoples of different temperaments and value systems.<sup>3</sup> Their dissimilarities, in the period of our survey, fostered repulsion and isolation. The inability of the Indians to accept western ideas and techniques, even

partially, added to the general ignorance of European situation, proved to be an important cause of the failure of the Indians to hold their own against the West.

As in the Far East, so in India there was a general ignorance about the West, though since the days of Akbar (*imperabat* 1556-1605) European scholars had been prominent in the Mughal court circles. Even in the education of princes and nobles this ignorance was apparent. Emperor Aurangzib (*imperabat* 1659-1707) is reported to have reprimanded his tutor for teaching him that

. . . the whole of Feringustan [Europe] was no more than some inconsiderable island, of which the most powerful monarch was formerly the king of Portugal, then he of Holland, and afterwards the king of England, . . . of . . . the kings of France and him of Andalusia, you told me that they resembled petty rajas and that the potentates of Hindustan eclipsed the glory of all other kings.<sup>4</sup>

To this general ignorance there were, of course, some exceptions. Prince Dara (1614-1659), Catrou reports,

. . . had acquired a knowledge of all our sciences and almost all the languages of Europe. So great was his attachment to the Europeans that it offended the nobles of the court. . . . His liberality had drawn into his service the most skillful engineers and cannoneers of all the European nationalities.<sup>5</sup>

However, people like Prince Dara were subjects of ridicule, and his liberality cost him his head.

This ignorance about the West continued well into the 1730's when Père Calmette reported:

Indian geographical knowledge extends no further east than China, as far north as the Caucasus, and to Ceylon on the south, with no greater extent to the west, so that they are very much surprised to see strangers who were not born in any of the fifty countries whose name they know.<sup>6</sup>

The isolationist attitude of the Indians was largely responsible for this ignorance. Hindus were a tolerant people but highly insular. The primary social institutions of Hinduism, caste and joint-family, hardly facilitated social intercourse with external communities. The polytheism of the Hindus was incomprehensible to the monotheistic Christians. Matters were made worse by the

efforts of the Europeans to convince the Indians that "the Christian faith was designed for the whole earth, and theirs [Indians'] only fabulous and false."<sup>7</sup> Social customs proved to be another impediment. The Hindus were largely vegetarians and hardly appreciated European dietary habits. Likewise, the European sense of toilet and personal cleanliness was in ill repute.<sup>8</sup>

Some of these social inhibitions did not apply to the Muslims. But Islamic orthodoxy had been traditionally hostile towards Christian expansion. Each side felt itself fighting the battles of its God. In 1507 Albuquerque had declared: "I trust in the passion of Jesus Christ in whom I place all confidence to break the spirits of the Moors."<sup>9</sup> In 1539 Suleiman I had issued a *fatwah* against the Christian infidels and called upon all Indian Muslim potentates to oppose the aggression of the Christians; otherwise their souls "would descend into hell."<sup>10</sup>

These attitudes contributed to the feeling of innate superiority in the Europeans as well as the Indians. In the seventeenth century Manucci reported:

Never are they [Indians] ready to listen to reason; they are very troublesome, high and low, without shame, neither having the fear of God. As for Europeans who come to India they must arm themselves with great patience and prudence, for not a soul will speak to them, this being the general attitude of India. Although they are deceivers, selfish, contumacious and unworthy of belief, we are abhorred by the lower classes, who hold us to be impure, being themselves worse than the pigs.<sup>11</sup>

And this author of the *Storia do Mogor* adds that the Hindus believed that "they [Europeans] have no polite manners, that they are ignorant, wanting in ordered life and very dirty," and that the aversions were "even greater than that of persons of quality in France for night soil workers and scavengers."<sup>12</sup> This feeling continued well until the 1730's, when Père Calmette reported:

India in the mind of her inhabitants is the queen among nations, and other men are mere barbarians in comparison . . . all the courtesy, courage and arts and science of Europeans cannot give our colonies the position which birth bestows on Indians even in the poorest circumstances. There is no nation that does not pride itself, but with us there is a sense of moderate presumption. Here nothing is proportionate: nobility, arts, science,

courtesy flourish only among them. It is true that along the coasts time has tempered their pride, but in the interior a white man hardly as yet escapes public ridicule.<sup>13</sup>

In the 1740's we find John Holwell calling the Hindus "[as] degenerate, crafty, superstitious and wicked a people as any race in the known world."<sup>14</sup> In the next decade Robert Clive complained:

The Moors as well as the Gentoos [Hindus] are indolent, luxurious, ignorant and cowardly beyond all conception.

These Mussalmans, gratitude they have none, base men of very narrow conception, and have adopted a system of politics more peculiar to this country than any other, viz: to attempt everything by treachery rather than force.<sup>15</sup>

The Indians, in their turn, held no better opinion of European strangers. Bengali historian Gholam Hossein Khan, the author of *Seir Mutaqherin* (completed 1783) opined:

. . . such is the complete difference, and the total dissimilarity betwixt the manners of their own country [England], and the customs and usages of Hindoostan, that all the endeavours of their chief rulers, and all the resorts they have put into motion, have answered no purpose at all. . . . But, over and above these considerations, it may be said with great truth that *such is the aversion which the English openly show for the company of the natives, and such the disdain which they betray for them, that no love, and no coalition* (two articles, which, by the bye, are the principle of all union and attachment, and the source of all regulation and settlement) *can take root between the conquerors and the conquered* . . .<sup>16</sup>

#### RESPONSE OF THE BENGALI ADMINISTRATION

Shaista Khan, the viceroy of Bengal (*fungebatur* 1664-78, 1679-88), called the English East India Company "a company of base, quarrelling people, and foul dealers."<sup>17</sup> *Se non è vero è ben trovato* because the social life of Europeans in India at this period was full of brawls and foul dealings. In the English company's records of 1706 we find Benjamin Walker being fined twenty rupees for using profane language in one of the Fort William Council meetings.<sup>18</sup> A certain Captain Smith challenged Governor William Hedges to a duel upon the Company's failure to fire guns in honor of his arrival in the settlement.<sup>19</sup> This led Hedges to ask the Council

if the governor was obliged to accept the challenge of every bully.<sup>20</sup> In 1706, Arthur King, a factor of the Company, considered himself insulted and outraged because the surgeon's wife had taken her place in the church above his wife, and he threatened disturbance if justice was not done.<sup>21</sup>

The attitude of the nawabs of Bengal toward this unrefined behavior of the Europeans was to demand a virtual *kow-tow*. In 1635 Agha Muhammed Zaman, deputy governor of Orissa,

. . . received the Englishmen in his audience-hall, affably inclined his head to Mr. Cartwright [leader of the party], then slipping off his sandal offered his foot to the English merchant to kiss, which he twice refused to do, but at last was fain to do it.<sup>22</sup>

The petitions of John Russell, English chief agent in Bengal, in 1711, to the Mughal officials are also a good indication of this *kow-tow* demand. To Azim-us Shan Khan, the governor of Bengal, he wrote

. . . with the humblest submission . . . dedicating at your feet the life wholly dedicated to your service . . . [John Russell] presents this *arazdasht* [petition] . . . after kissing the ground on which treads the greatest and most powerful prince.<sup>23</sup>

In a letter to Emperor Jahandar Shah (*imperabat* 1712-13), Russell declared that his forehead was to be considered the tip of the emperor's stool.<sup>24</sup> To Farrukhsiyar (*imperabat* 1713-19), Russell presented himself as

. . . the smallest particle of sand . . . with his forehead rubbed on the ground . . . and [giving] reverence due from a slave . . . to your throne which is the seat of miracles.<sup>25</sup>

#### LA POLITIQUE N'A PAS D'ENTRAILLES!

We must now examine the Mughal attitude towards the trade of European companies. A favorable trade depended on favorable trading privileges from Indian rulers. In Bengal the European companies negotiated arrangements with local officials to establish factories, to send agents into the interior to procure goods, and to transmit goods to Europe without payment of duties or with payment of nominal duties. The official orders confirming these privileges were often vague and were interpreted differently by local officials and European traders. The policy of the Europeans was "to try the effect of a bribe on the officers of the nawab,"<sup>26</sup> when-

ever their trade privileges were questioned. So long as the volume of trade was small, and adequate bribes forthcoming, the interference of the Mughal officials was limited.<sup>27</sup> But with the rapid growth of the European investments in Bengal, which coincided with the viceroyalty of Shaista Khan, the demands for bribes, and failing bribes, exactions, grew rather indiscriminately. In the 1670's and 1680's the stoppage of English trade by local officials had become a serious abuse. The English company therefore decided to carry on trade under the protection of arms. It was felt that the threat of force would "oblige the Indians to do them justice."<sup>28</sup> A war in 1685 ensued, and by 1689 the Company's forces had been completely routed on land, though the sea-battles were indecisive.<sup>29</sup> Recognizing the failure of its military expedition, the Company sued the Mughal emperor for peace, and on February 27, 1690, the emperor imposed a humiliating peace treaty, obliging the Company to pay a fine of £150,000 and to make good the Indian losses. The defeat apparently meant that the English aim of establishing a fortified settlement, or what the court of directors had called "a polity of civil and military power . . . [to] secure such a large revenue as may be the foundation of a large, well grounded, sure English dominion in India for all time to come,"<sup>30</sup> had remained unrealized.

This setback, however, proved to be only temporary. Job Charnock, the English agent, returned to Bengal (d. 1693), more determined than ever to secure a fortified settlement by persuasion, diplomacy, and the use of political opportunities. In 1696, taking advantage of a local insurrection, his successor partially fortified the settlements. Two years later a bribe of Rs. 16,000 secured for the Company the zamindari rights of three villages of Calcutta, Sutaniti, and Govindpur.

In 1700 Aurangzib sent to Bengal as his diwan Murshid Quli Khan, a strict revenue administrator. Bengal, like Gujerat, was the source of a very large share of the empire's revenues.<sup>31</sup> The diwan, though sensible that "the prosperity of Bengal and the increase of the revenues depended on its advantageous commerce, particularly those carried by the ships from Europe," was nevertheless "jealous of the growing power of the Europeans in Bengal."<sup>32</sup> He interdicted the English trade from 1701 to 1704 and demanded Rs. 30,000 to vacate the seizure.<sup>33</sup> On another occasion he demanded

Rs. 150,000 to renew the Company's privileges,<sup>34</sup> and later Rs. 30,000 to allow the Company to resume its trade.<sup>35</sup>

The policy of the nawabs of Bengal "had been invariable in opposing landholding,"<sup>36</sup> and the English claim of unlimited duty-free trade. Murshid Quli Khan and his successors were willing to permit the goods belonging to the Company to be exempt from custom duties, but they refused to permit the employees of the companies to carry on their private trade free of duties. The hazy distinction between the official trade and private trade created difficulties. The Company's employees tried to pass goods belonging to them as goods of the Company, and thereby exempt from duties. The officials of the nawabs, in their turn, in order to determine if the goods in transit actually belonged to the Company, were empowered to open the cargoes. This gave them the opportunity to hold clearance of goods unless a bribe was forthcoming. Thus neither the Company's agents nor the Mughal officials observed the trade agreements with fidelity.

Murshid Quli Khan also denied permission to the Company to extend the confines of its settlement. But the Company by fraudulent purchase of villages in the name of its native employees extended the domain anyway. This confused the revenue status of the settlement. The nawabs of Bengal, therefore, from time to time demanded lump sum tributes to square off what they thought the Company owed them on account of the revenues. For example, in 1726 a demand for Rs. 44,000 was made; in 1736 for Rs. 55,000; and in 1754 for Rs. 3,000,000. On these occasions compromises were made for Rs. 20,000, Rs. 55,000, and Rs. 825,000 respectively.<sup>37</sup> Personal relations had become so bitter that in 1733 the nawab of Bengal wrote to the emperor:

I am scarce able to recount to you the abominable practices of this people [Englishmen]. When they first came to this country they petitioned the then government in a humble manner for liberty to purchase a spot of ground to build a factory house upon, which was no sooner granted but they ran up a strong fort, surrounded it with a ditch which has communication with the river, and mounted a great number of guns upon the walls. They have enticed several merchants and others to go and take protection under them and they collect a revenue which amounts yearly to Rs. 100,000 . . . they rob and plunder and carry great

number of the king's subjects of both sexes into slavery into their own country . . .<sup>38</sup>

It is, therefore, obvious that the English were not mentioned "but with pity and contempt" in the Mughal circles.<sup>39</sup>

It was, however, the question of private trade of the Europeans that proved to be an odious point of contention between the two parties. The practice of trading on personal account permeated all ranks of the Company in the early eighteenth century. "I am extremely anxious to go as chaplain on the East India fleet," wrote an applicant; "the stipend is small, only £40 [per annum], but there are many advantages. The last brought home £3,000."<sup>40</sup> The abuse of duty-free passes had become so progressively bad as to alarm the court of directors, which "transmitted to Fort William twenty-five standing orders against it, each of them directing on detection, restitution to the Shah's duties, immediate dismissal from service, and the aggressor to be sent to England on the first ship."<sup>41</sup> The Fort William council paid hardly any attention to these orders. Private trade had become a *sine qua non* of the existence of Europeans in Bengal's uncongenial climate. *Pace* court of directors, the Council replied: "If the Company allowed no [duty-free] private trade, their servants must starve . . ."<sup>42</sup> The local officials' reaction to the violation of trade laws was to seize the Company's goods from time to time, but these penalties failed to have a salutary effect.

Perhaps the reason was that the shadow of the English defeat of 1689 at the hands of the Mughals had ceased to exist. As a result of the European successes in the South in the 1740's and the 1750's, the European outlook on the Indian political situation had undergone a change. The "pettifogging" traders had become "imperialist swashbucklers and large scale extortionists."<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the Mughal empire was tottering; Bengal had become an *imperium in imperio*, but was without adequate military strength. Nawab Alivardi Khan (*regnabat* 1740-56) adopted a twofold policy towards the Europeans: first, to play the English against the French, "as he wisely judged their union only could make them formidable,"<sup>44</sup> and second, to oppose any kind of further military fortifications of the European establishments in his dominions. When war broke out in the South in 1744, he ordered the Europeans not to commit any hostilities within his provinces—an order he was able to enforce.

Alivardi Khan was very pessimistic about the future independ-



ence of Bengal. He had the feeling that "the hatmen would possess themselves of all the shores of Hindia."<sup>45</sup> He was careful to avoid provocation to the Europeans who were waxing supreme in the South. Several of his courtiers advised him to move against the English. Khwaja Wajid, speaking on behalf of the merchants, declared that thirty million rupees could be gained by driving the English out of Bengal, but the nawab turned a deaf ear to the suggestion.<sup>46</sup> To Mustapha Khan's advice that the European settlements be reduced, the nawab in a *pièce d'occasion* said:

My dear children, Mustapha Khan is a soldier of fortune, a man in monthly pay, who lives by his sabre; of course he wishes that I should have occasion to employ him and to put in his power to ask favors for himself and his friends, but in the name of common sense what is the matter with your own selves that you should join issue with him . . .

What wrong the English have done me that I should wish them ill? Look at yonder plain covered with grass; should you set fire to it, there would be no stopping its progress; and who is the man who shall put out the fire that shall break forth at sea, and from thence come out upon land? Beware of lending an ear to such proposals . . .<sup>47</sup>

He told Mir Jafar that the Europeans were like a hive of bees "of whose honey you might reap the benefit, but that if you disturbed their hive they would sting you to death."<sup>48</sup>

Alivardi, though he played the French against the English, was careful to follow a policy of noninvolvement in Anglo-French conflicts in the Deccan. He rejected an alliance proposed by the French Commander Bussy, and threatened to drive the French out of Bengal, after the death of Nasir Jung in the Deccan, were they to engage in Bengal's internal politics.<sup>49</sup> He was aware of the role of naval power in contemporary history and doubted his ability to cope with it. With a prophetic vision he declared:

If I triumph [over the Europeans] men would condemn me by saying that I was plundering the traders of my kingdom. And if, God avert it, the contrary happens I shall be incurring disgrace at the hands of subjects of my kingdom.<sup>50</sup>

But Alivardi died in 1756 prognosticating the evil that was to flow from European intrusion in Indian politics. And on his deathbed he seemed aware of Bengal's impotence to meet the challenge of

European expansion in India. In his lifetime he had guarded the independence of Bengal jealously but after his death *dis aliter visum*.

## NOTES

1. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), VIII, 114.
2. Guy Wint, *The British in Asia* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1954), pp. 17, 42.
3. See a discussion by Filmer S. C. Northrop in *The Meeting of East and West* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1946).
4. Cited by François Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, tr. Archibald Constable, and Rev. Vincent A. Smith (2nd ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 155.
5. François Catrou, *History of the Mogul Dynasty in India* (London: J. M. Richardson, 1826), p. 198.
6. Letter of September 28, 1730, in *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (Paris: Nicolas le Clerc, n.d.), XXI, 3-4. Also see Luke Srafton, *Reflections on the Government &c. of Indostan* (London: A. Millar, 1763), pp. 20-22.
7. Vincent le Blanc, *Les Voyages Fameux de Sieur Vincent le Blanc* (Paris: G. Cloviers, 1658), chap. xiv.
8. In medieval Europe there was a strong prejudice against taking baths, and prior to the seventeenth century the baths of water were scarcely used. See comments by Karam Ali in "Muzaffarnamah," tr. Jadunath Sarkar in *Bengal Nawabs* ("William Jones Bi-centenary Series." Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1952), p. 63.
9. Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, tr. Maulvi Abdus Salam (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1904), p. 408.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Nicolo Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, ed. William Irvine ("Indian Text Series." London: John Murray, 1908), II, 452.
12. *Ibid.*, III, 73, 320.
13. *Op. cit.*, note 6, pp. 4-5. For corroborative evidence see Manucci, *op. cit.*, III, 320.
14. Cited by James Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs* (2d ed., rev. Countess of Montalembert; London: R. Bentley, 1874), II, 457.
15. Cited by George Forrest, *The Life of Lord Clive* (London: Cassell & Co., 1918), II, 120.
16. *Seir Mautaqherin*, tr. Nota Manus (Raymond Mustapha) (Calcutta: T. D. Chatterjee, 1902), III, 160-61, 170-71.
17. Cited by C. R. Wilson, *Annals of the Early English in Bengal* (Calcutta: W. Thacker & Co., 1895-1917), I, 66.
18. *Ibid.*, I, 265.
19. *Ibid.*, I, 250-51.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, Consultation of March 4, 1706.
22. Salim, *op. cit.*, p. 410.
23. Wilson, *op. cit.*, II, Bk. I, 22.
24. *Ibid.*, II, Bk. I, 65.
25. *Ibid.*, II, Bk. III.
26. Cited in *English Factories in India, New Series, 1670-84*, ed. Charles Fawcett (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1936-55), II, 354.

27. There were hardly any disputes between the Company and Shah Shuja (*fungebatur* 1651-60). During the viceroyalty of Mir Jumla (*fungebatur* 1660-63), though the nawab and his subordinates used the threat of trade embargo on the Company's business, the relation between the two was fairly cordial. The nawab even lent Rs. 125,000 to the English agent Jonathan Trevisa, of which Rs. 9,700 was outstanding at Mir Jumla's death.
28. *A Letter to a Friend Concerning East India Trade* (London: Stationers Hall, 1696), p. 14. Also see *The Diary of William Hedges*, ed. Henry Yule ("Hakluyt Society Publications." London: Hakluyt Society, 1887-89), I, 117-39.
29. A good account of the war is in Wilson, *op. cit.*, I, Bk. III.
30. Court of Directors, London, to the Fort St. George Council, December 12, 1687, cited by P. E. Roberts, *History of British India* (2d ed.: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 44.
31. In 1707 the revenues of Bengal province amounted to £3,358,179 out of the total imperial revenues of £37,724,615. William Bolts, *Considerations on India Affairs* (London: J. Dodsley, 1772), I, 16-17.
32. Salimullah, "Tarikh-i-Bangala," tr. Francis Gladwin, in *A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bangbasj Press, 1906), pp. 47-48.
33. Bengal Public Consultations, October 27, 1704, India Office Records, Commonwealth Relations Office, London. (Cited hereafter as Consultations.)
34. Consultations, December 13, 1708. All the Mughal authorizations for trade were only *pro libitum* and were required to be renewed *de novo* as and when the new emperors and the new nawabs replaced the old incumbents. This in itself became the source of a long dispute. The Europeans insisted on the permanent nature of their concessions, the Mughal officials considered them temporary. See *English Factories in India, 1618-69*, ed. William Foster (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1906-27), X, 305; XIII, 178, and *English Factories in India, New Series*, IV, 158.
35. Consultations, January 3, 1709; June 30, 1708; October 13, 1711.
36. MS. Eur[opean] D. 283, fols. 14, 24, India Office Records, Commonwealth Relations Office, London.
37. Consultations, December 12, 1726; June 12, 1727; September 2, 1735; July 6, 1736; also, Fort William Council to the Court of Directors, August 3, 1744; November 9, 1745; Bengal Correspondence, India Office Records, Commonwealth Relations Office, London.
38. Shujauddin Khan to Khan Durran, n.d., cited in Consultations, June 18, 1753.
39. A comment made by Warren Hastings in 1756, cited in M.E. Monckton Jones, *Warren Hastings in Bengal* ("Oxford Historical and Literary Series." Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1918), p. 45.
40. Cited by E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, Vol. II, *The Age of Mercantilism* (3d ed., London: Adam and Charles Black, 1943), p. 304.
41. MS. Eur. D. 283, fol. 25.
42. *Ibid.*, fols. 24-25.
43. T. G. Percival Spear, *The Nabobs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 23.
44. Scrafton, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
45. *Seir Mutaqherin*, II, 198-99.
46. "Muzaffarnamah," p. 56.
47. *Loc. cit.*; *Seir Mutaqherin*, II, 163-64.
48. Scrafton, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
49. *Seir Mutaqherin*, II, 163-64.
50. "Muzaffarnamah," p. 56.