

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.¹

[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.²

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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

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."⁷ 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.⁸

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."⁹ 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."¹⁰

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.¹¹

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."¹² 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,

