

Karl Marx in Bangladesh

Saturday 2 June 2018, by [HASSAN Mirza](#) (Date first published: 5 May 2018).

A survey of the influence of Marxist thought in Bangladesh.

No I am not talking about my encounter with the ghost of Karl Marx in Bangladesh. If you are interested in such stories you should read Howard Zinn's Marx in Soho or Sumonto Bandyopadhyay's *Bhuture Molakat* (Ghostly Encounter)—two hilarious and, at the same time, intellectually erudite accounts of meeting the ghost of Marx in New York and Kolkata, respectively. Rather, what I am going to narrate here is the intellectual or conceptual footprints of Marx in Bangladesh—how his ideas travelled within the elite academia, the intellectual discourses and middle class political activism as well as the ordinary people and peasantries in remote villages in colonial Bengal and independent Bangladesh. I must warn the reader that the following account is not based on any systematic research but relies on what I have read, seen, and experienced over the decades. Clearly this is not an exhaustive survey of the topic.

Sumonto Bandyopadhyay noted that the prominent intellectuals of colonial Bengal, who were contemporaries of Marx and were interested and wrote about the conditions of workers and peasantry and their struggles, didn't seem to show any awareness of Marx and the name never showed up in their relevant writings. These would include Prince Dwarkanath Tagore (grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore, who witnessed, first hand, the famous Chartist movement in London and wrote about it), Shibnath Shastri (who might have written a letter, in 1871, to the International Working Men's Association-headed by Karl Marx—to set up a branch in India), and young Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya (who showed great sympathy for the peasantry in his essay "Shamya", meaning "equality"). As it turned out, to enter the intellectual realm of the Indian subcontinent, Marx had to wait for the Russian Revolution.

The two pioneers of Marxist intellectualism in Bengal (and possibly in entire India) were Bhupendranath Dutta (younger brother of Swami Vivekananda) and Manabendranath Roy (famously known as MN Roy and the founder of both Mexican and Indian Communist Parties). They both met Lenin in Russia (in 1921) and were inspired by him to initiate Marxist analysis of Indian politics, society and economy. If I have to zoom in to the contributions of East Bengalis to Bengal Marxism, the first name that comes to mind is comrade Muzaffar Ahmad—one of the founders of Communist Party in undivided India. He was born in Swandip of Noakhali in 1889. When and how did he first come in contact with Marx's ideas? As he recollected in his memoirs, with great effort he managed to collect Taka 10, and with that he bought four books—one of these was *People's Marx: Abridged popular edition of "Capital"*. This was in the November of 1921.

Although proto-socialist ideas, even Bolshevism (as the de facto expression of the Muslim subaltern discourse of resistance against the ideological hegemony of colonial masters and native Hindu elites) informed different journals and magazines with which comrade Muzaffar Ahmad was associated, it was only in *Langol* (Plough) and then *Ganobani* (Statement of the People) where explicit uses of Marx and Marxist ideas can be seen. *Langol* was published in 1925 and the name was changed to *Ganobani* in late 1926. These were de facto edited and managed by comrade Muzaffar Ahmad and its *Prodhan Porichalok* (Principal Director) was the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. The first essay on

Marx published in *Langol* was by Debabrata Basu (titled “Karl Marx”, in 1925) followed by an essay by Kutubuddin Ahmad (titled “Karl Marx-er Siksha” or “Teachings of Karl Marx”, in 1925)—perhaps the first ever essay on Marx written by a Muslim in Bengali. The first translation of Marx’s own writing (a letter written on India in 1853 that was sent to *New York Tribune*) was published in the number 12 issue of *Langol* in 1926. This could possibly be the first ever writing of Marx translated in Bengali.

Did Poet Nazrul read Marx? Can many of his poems and essays published in *Langol* and *Ganobani* be considered “Marxist”? In response to the first question, historian Neilesh Bose’s (who wrote a book on Bengal Muslim intellectual discourse of this period) not so confident answer is: “...it is unlikely that he did”. He also observes that he finds “...a curious convergence” between Poet Nazrul and Marx in analysing religious bigotry. I find his observation a bit odd since being the *Prodhan Porichalok* of a journal that published articles on and by Marx, is it logical to assume that Poet Nazrul will miss reading Marx in the original, given his voracious reading habit? Let’s not quibble over this any further. One thing can be safely assumed: Nazrul was heavily tutored on Marx’s ideas by his friend comrade Muzaffar Ahmad and during the *Langol* and *Ganobani* period, his creative expressions tended to manifest various core ideas of Marx—both economic and social. As to the question whether his writings can be considered “Marxist”, take the poem Kuli-Mujur (Coolies and Labourers).

On Marx’s economic theory of surplus value being expropriated by the capitalist:

Beton Diacho?—chup rou joto mithyabadir dal!

Koto pai diye kulider tui koto crore peli bol!

(Have you paid the wages?—shut up liars!

How many millions did you make for the few coins you doled out to the porters!)

On Marx’s idea that as exchange-values, all commodities are “merely definite quantities of congealed labour time”:

Rajpothe tobo choliche motor, shagore jahaj chole,

Railpothe chole bashpo-shokot, desh cheye gyalo kole,

Bolo to e-shob kahader dan! Tomar ottalika

Kar khune ranga?—thuli khule dyakho, proti eete ache likha.

(Motor cars run on the highways, ships on the seas

Steam-engines on the rail-tracks, factories fill up the land

Tell me who created these! Whose blood

is your mansion stained with? Open your eyes, it’s written on each brick.)

If Poet Nazrul’s creative outbursts in *Langol* and *Ganobani* were informed by Marxist ideology, they were indeed very unique in their forms, and like many other creative geniuses, his social and political messages were infused with deep emotional appeal. In this sense, he belonged to the intellectual tradition forged by the two intellectual giants of colonial Bengal—Raja Rammohun Roy

and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, that is to appeal not only to the intellects of the people but to their hearts also (I am certain, as one of the authors of the Communist Manifesto, which speaks to our hearts like a poem, Marx would have approved Poet Nazrul's "communication strategy"). Note the deep-seated emotion in the message about class violence in colonial Bengal in the same poem:

Dekhinu shedin rele,

Kuli bole babu shab tare thele dilo niche fele.

Chokh fete elo jol

Amni kore ki jogot juria mar khabe durbol?

(On the train, I saw the other day

A babu sahib shoved a man just because he was a porter

I couldn't hold back my tears

Will the downtrodden be abused like this throughout the world?)

I also find Poet Nazrul's contribution in the two journals to be strategic. I would call it a "national popular" strategic discourse, an idea that was almost simultaneously developed by the great Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. To put it very simply, this is the idea that the subaltern classes (i.e., of lower ranks) need to develop their own ideology to counter the hegemonic ideas of the elites that tend to influence and control their thoughts and world-views. Poet Nazrul, by brilliantly deploying popular emotional idioms in his creative works, published in these two journals, acted as a de facto organic intellectual of the subalterns in the colonial context. Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad targeted the intellect of the readers (with copious references to Marx and Lenin and other radicals) and Poet Nazrul aimed at their hearts (no references used even in his essays)—thereby, the two editors successfully struck an optimum balance in their counter hegemonic discursive assaults on the ideologies of the colonial elites—both Western and native.

Take another example of the clever popular-national strategy of the poet. He was asked to translate the "Communist Internationale" (the global anthem of the Communist International). Poet Nazrul's version was published in *Ganobani* in 1927. Bengali readers, who are not familiar with the history of left politics, will be surprised to know that the translation is the Rebel Poet's famous:

Jago, anashano bondi , uthore joto

Jogoter lanchito bhagyohoto...

(Stand up, damned of the Earth

Stand up, prisoners of starvation...)

This is a song that hundreds of millions of Bengalis all over the world have heard and sung since it was composed by the poet and continues to be popular even now. More importantly, his version is entirely different in tune (from the original) and the lyrics were trans-created rather than translated literally. Communist activists in Bengal later made a literal translation of the "Communist Internationale" with original tune intact. How many people know about this now? Possibly only a few hundred dedicated activists? The Rebel Poet could easily connect to the hearts of the people just like the spider is able to spin its intricate web. It was part of his nature (with due apology to Marx).

But, the person who can take the major credit for popularising Marx's ideas among thousands of communist activists in Bengal over many decades is Reboti Barman. Born in a remote village of Mymensingh district, he studied in a local school and secured the first position in the entrance exam in the entire Bengal (in 1922). Later he studied economics at Calcutta (Kolkata) University and passed the MA exam with distinction and was awarded a gold medal. With such a distinguished academic achievement he could have easily entered the ICS cadre—a highly coveted job in colonial Bengal, or could have become a professor in any elite university. Rather, he chose to be a political activist and fight for the freedom of his country. He was the first person in undivided India who translated Marx's *Capital* (abridged version) in a local language (Bengali, in 1939). He also wrote several other primers on Marxism, which were published by *Gonoshahitya Chakra* (People's Literature Circle), a publishing house established by him in Dhaka in 1938. In the introduction to his translated *Capital*, he wrote "*Capital* is very difficult to understand (*durbodhdho*) and it is very long (*brihot*)—but it should not be avoided by the revolutionaries and true seekers of knowledge for these reasons". As a Bangladeshi left political leader of national stature told me recently, it was through the writings of Reboti Barman that many left activists of the country got their initial understanding of Marx and socialism.

Did Maulana Bhashani—the famous Red Maulana—ever read Marx? I recently asked this question to a prominent biographer of Bhashani—Syed Abul Maksud. His answer was, "Probably not." But in his recently published book on Bhashani, he points out that Bhashani often asked Marxist economist Akhlaqur Rahman about different aspects of modern economics (this story goes back to the late 1940s). Professor Rahman spent many nights tutoring Maulana on the subject and the latter listened "like an obedient pupil." One could plausibly assume that given the socialist leanings of both, Marx and Marxian economics were invariably covered in the tutorial sessions. Marx surely had some inputs in Maulana's variant of socialism that was also informed by Islamic sense of justice.

Fast forward to independent Bangladesh: The esteemed Professor Akhlaqur Rahman, Marx's "interlocutor" for Maulana Bhashani, was more of a politically engaged theorist rather than an armchair Marxist academic. His most notable intervention in radical politics was the drafting of the polemical document (in 1974) for Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), which essentially argued that the capitalist mode of production (a Marxist jargon describing the nature of the economic system) has matured in the Bangladesh agrarian sector. Socialist parties needed to determine this to identify the class structure of the society to set their *rono niti* (war strategy). By declaring the agrarian sector capitalist he took an iconoclastic position since the prevailing consensus among the left (mostly underground) at that time was that the agrarian sector was dominated by various types of pre-capitalist modes of production. It was highly risky for him to go against the grain since clashes of opinions could potentially lead to one's death—a culture that existed within the underground left during the '70s. With the decline of JSD in the '80s he settled down as a teacher in a prominent public university with the noble pursuit of teaching Marxian economics. For this, he wrote a textbook on Marxian economics in Bengali (first published in 1987). In the introduction of the book, he echoed Reboti Barman—"content [of Marxist economics] is such that it is extremely difficult to make it easier to comprehend"—a perennial problem besetting Marxist practitioners. Professor Rahman also noted in the introduction that he tried his best to make the text reader-friendly, but with all due respect to him, I must confess that I found his prose denser and much more complex than the ones written by Reboti Barman.

Another legendary Marxist professor was Abu Mahmud, an economist revered by a host of left politicians, particularly of the Maoist variant, as intellectual guide. I met him in the early 1980s and with his encouragement ran a Marxist study circle for about six months in his Fuller Road apartment. It was an unforgettable experience for me. We (about 20-25 young students) used to gather in his "drawing room", the four walls of which were covered by stacks of books (no less than

2,000). He had the entire collection of *Marxism Today*—the official organ of the British Communist Party—and many other books (entire series by Eric Hobsbawm, among others) and left journals including *Monthly Review*—the world-famous Marxist journal. For us, it was manna from heaven (remember these were the pre-internet days). I saw many left leaders and intellectuals visiting him to invite him for delivering lectures on Marx and socialism in various small towns, even villages. Marx indeed had a good time travelling with him in the remote pre-capitalist zones (or were these capitalist?) of the country.

I found Professor Mahmud a bit of an “orthodox” Marxist (in the line of British Communist Party of the 1970s) and he used to disparage the New Left that emerged in Europe and US in the late '60s. I remember lending him a book by the doyen of British New Left—Perry Anderson. It was *Lineage of the Absolutist State*—a masterpiece of Marxist historiography. Professor Mahmud, to my surprise, was deeply impressed by it. At that moment I realised that his disliking of the New Left was perhaps based on hearsay rather than actual reading of their works. Professor Mahmud wrote journalistic articles on Marxist analysis of Bangladesh political economy that was serialised in the left weekly *Holiday*. He also produced a couple of Marxist books but these again were mainly popular and polemical in nature. To the best of my knowledge, both Professors Rahman and Mahmud did not attempt to produce any rigorous Marxist academic analysis of Bangladesh.

Such Marxist academic analysis came, for the first time in independent Bangladesh, from a most unlikely site of knowledge production: the government-owned think tank called Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, popularly known as BIDS.

In 1972, Abu Abdullah, a young research economist at the BIDS, wrote a Marxist academic analysis of the nationalist movement that led to the independence of Bangladesh. To the best of my knowledge, this article, entitled “The Class Bases of Nationalism: Pakistan and Bangladesh,” is the first ever Marxist academic work written on Bangladesh by a Bangladeshi. Abdullah, a scholar with a razor sharp intellect and possibly one of the finest minds of his generation, also pioneered theoretically sophisticated Marxist analysis of the political economy of rural development and agrarian economy of Bangladesh in the later part of the '70s. His (as lead author) devastating and analytically sharp intellectual assault on the influential Comilla Model (pioneered by Akhtar Hameed Khan and globally promoted by the western governments and academia) of rural development, aimed to puncture the comforting myth that the model represented neither capitalism nor socialism but a “third cooperative way” and should be replicated nationwide (remember this was the period of Cold War with socialist agrarian revolutions cropping up all around and with the recent memories of Naxalite movement in the neighborhood). Abdullah’s conclusion was: Comilla Model was destined to develop “cooperative capitalism” in agriculture and he endorsed such development and cited Lenin in support of his argument—“[cooperative capitalism]...is a variety of state capitalism and as such is advantageous and useful for us at the present time...” In personal conversations (in the early and late '80s) he told me that he was a great believer of the modernising and progressive role of the bourgeoisie in Bangladesh, and in contrast to dependency theorists (who argued local “comprador” bourgeoisie are hopelessly dependent on, and are just agents of, foreign capital and have little role to play in national industrialisation), he believed the country will experience capitalist industrial development in the decades ahead—a view that had a very few supporters among the progressive academics/intellectuals of the country during the '70s and '80s. And, perhaps, thanks to Abu Abdullah, BIDS library subscribed to various New Left journals, including the world-famous *New Left Review* and other journals such as *Review of Radical Political Economics*, *Capital and Class* and a few more. I remember spending countless hours in the library feasting on these.

The person who can be credited for publishing the first book-length academic Marxist analysis of Bangladesh’s political economy is Muhiuddin Alamgir, again an economist at BIDS at that time. His book titled *Bangladesh: a case of below poverty level equilibrium trap* (1978, BIDS), is empirically

very rich and deployed complex bundle of Marxist and neo-Marxist theories with an icing of Maoism, (not sure all these gelled very well). He writes, "...it can be stated that the situation in a country like Bangladesh cannot possibly improve until an end is brought to the dominance of the comprador bourgeoisie and other classes representing basically semi-feudal/semi-colonial interests"—a view in sharp contrast to the optimism of Abu Abdullah as noted above. From our privileged historical hindsight (in 2018) we can reasonably argue that Abdullah has proven to be prophetic (our patrimonial plundering capitalism is still capitalism).

To continue with the BIDS Marxist saga, one cannot avoid mentioning of the big tome entitled *Public Enterprise in an Intermediate Regime* published by BIDS in 1980. The two authors were Professors Rehman Sobhan (Research Director of BIDS at that time) and Muzaffar Ahmad (Director, IBA, Dhaka University, at that time). Marx became relevant for the theoretical approach of the book through an interlocutor—the famous Polish Neo-Marxist Michal Kalecki. The authors used his theory of "intermediate regime" (state captured by a coalition of petty bourgeois and rich farmers). The book is a fascinating class analytic political economy account of the failure of the regime in the early '70s to manage public enterprises in an efficient and transparent manner but also covered the whole gamut of the political economy of that period. Professor Sobhan continued to explore "the contradictions of the Bangladeshi bourgeoisie" in his subsequent works. In parallel, a major focus of his research during the '80s and '90s was on western donors' pernicious influences on the national economy that implicitly deployed analytical assumptions of Neo-Marxist theories of Andre Gunder Frank and Fernando Cardoso (these two were famous for formulating dependency theories as defined earlier). Throughout their academic lives Professors Sobhan and Ahmad passionately advocated for economic democracy (public ownership, cooperatives, etc)—a core element in Marx's economic thought.

Marxist political anthropologist Professor BK Jahangir's most prominent study (published in the mid-80s) attempted to show the nature of evolution of capitalist mode of production in the agriculture of Bangladesh with attendant development of polarisation and differentiation of the peasantry (we may find it quaint in 2018 but such intellectual exploration was a big deal for the Marxist academics in the '80s). His biggest contribution was the establishment of a Marxist/Left research centre within Dhaka University (ran for about 12-15 years in the campus), which published journals and books that prioritised rigorous Marxist/radical intellectualism and nurtured new generations of radical academics.

How did Marx fare with the peasants and their organisers in rural Bangladesh? I was very privileged to experience a peasant rally, organised by a communist organisation, in a remote village in Pabna in 1980. During the discussion sessions I sat with the audience (all peasants) to listen to the leaders' speeches covering strategies, tactics and principles of peasant movements. The speakers included, among others, two eminent Marxist political leaders—the most revered revolutionary theoretician Badruddin Umar and an eminent trade union leader of the '80s, Daktar Saifuddahar. The speakers sincerely tried to present simple versions of various theories/analyses of Marx, Lenin and Mao on relevant issues, many of which were obviously quite abstract to a largely non-literate crowd. The audience kept quiet and patiently focused on the speeches. It was bit of a surreal experience for me. I still regret the fact that I didn't conduct a quick survey among the audience to find out their opinions about the speeches they heard. I now wonder what Poet Nazrul or Maulana Bhashani would have done in such a situation.

During the session breaks I chatted with a few peasant leaders. One of them proudly declared that their leaders—Badruddin Umar and Saifuddahar—are the only Marxists in Bangladesh who have actually read three volumes of Marx's *Capital* and have understood it. I have emphasised the word "understood" since he did the same when he spoke. I totally concur with the peasant leader that it is a commendable feat on anybody's part to understand such notoriously difficult works of Marx and I

can clearly see comrade Reboti Barman and Professor Akhlaqur Rahman vigorously nodding their heads in agreement.

On my way back from the village, I fortunately bumped into another legendary peasant leader Tipu Biswas, who was participating in another peasant rally near Pabna city. I asked him about the economic and social conditions of the peasantry in his areas of operations and what political strategies he thought would be appropriate to mobilise them. In our discussions the name of Mao came quite often, Lenin and Charu Majumdar a few times but never Marx. I thought perhaps he found Marx's ideas too abstract and irrelevant to explain to me the conditions of the peasantries in his areas and for the political strategies that he would like to devise.

During my undergraduate years I had the opportunity to closely study polemical documents of the underground left parties of Bangladesh that operated in the '70s. Sensing my leftist inclinations, my professor asked me to review such documents as a part of tutorial assignment. I managed to read about 40 documents. Karl Marx hardly showed up in these—being effectively elbowed out by the likes of Mao, Charu Majumdar and Stalin.

I have not been a close observer of Marxist intellectualism in Bangladesh in recent years. But to keep abreast with the development in this area I read at least one journal—*Notun Diganta* (New Horizon, edited by Professor Sirajul Islam Chowdhury)—and one magazine—*Shorbojon Katha* (Public Voice, edited by Professor Anu Muhammad). The editors—two eminent Marxist public intellectuals of Bangladesh—deserve our deepest appreciation for keeping the Marxist discourse alive in an increasingly challenging political and ideological environment.

P.S.

* "Karl Marx in Bangladesh". The Daily Star:

<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/perspective/karl-marx-bangladesh-1571515>

<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/perspective/karl-marx-bangladesh-part-2-1571884>