

# Recoding Utopian Fellowship in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Socio-Economic Study

Akrur Sardar

Research Scholar, Presidency University, Department of History

## Abstract:

The concept of Utopia, originally formulated by Thomas More in his work *Utopia* in 1516, refers to an ideal, perfect society. Over the 20th century, the idea of Utopia has been applied to the social economy of Bengal, encompassing various enterprises and organizations such as cooperatives, mutuals, associations, foundations, social enterprises, and paritarian institutions that share common values and features. However, political turmoil in Bengal since the late 80s has affected its social, religious, and economic spheres. Despite the challenges, delving into the Utopian notion may help analyze specific branches of Bengal's socio-economy that have potential for development, laying a foundation for future progress. By closely examining these fields, there may be an opportunity to establish a successful social economy in Bengal, following the principles of Utopian ideology, albeit not in a perfect form, but as a significant step towards future development. Can these sectors successfully embody the Utopian ideology in shaping Bengal's socio-economic landscape?

**Keywords:** Utopia, Self-reliance, Atmashakti, Spinning Wheel, Neo- classical economy

Throughout history, visionaries have envisioned an ideal society that leads to human happiness, prosperity, and equality. After Plato's **Republic**,<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas More's **Utopia**<sup>2</sup> visualizes an egalitarian society that ensures stability in the entire fields and also grants economic justice. Thomas More's Utopia, published in 1516 was an exemplary work of how to organize a society based on common property. With an exceptional blend of property, organizations and sound economic insights, Esa Mangeloja and Tomi Ovaska, contended that More built a framework for a society that could be viable in the long run.<sup>3</sup> It's an attempt to cover More's Utopian notion mirroring upon the social economic relevance of Bengal during 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will investigate that what resources does Bengal possesses that its socio economy can trace certain Utopian renaissance.

The latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was considered to be the darkest period in the eventful history of India and 19th century was considered to be the harbinger for modern India with colorful interlude within social, economic, political and religious affairs as well. The initial outcome of the colonial rule in India was utter confusion, tremendous disorder, investing economic ruins of the country. East India Company's commercial interest and private trade encouraged the way for a total breakdown of the political and economic structure of the country.<sup>4</sup> British trade during 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, worked synonymous as a conspiring nature for the mutual profit at the cost of the economy of Bengal that raised new clues of under developments. On the other hand, it also proves that history offered a transition which often requires

political trials and errors offered by the British government that later manifested into mass chaos<sup>5</sup>. Whereas More's Utopia encourages for an ideal society but since the higher tier of the administration stands with corruption that it collapses stability within the recurring development of other fields such as politics, economic, religious and cultural. Hence, Bengal encountered a huge challenge as British rule cracked the backbone of social economy of Bengal. In the respective year 1763, Bengal was standing as an independent state that had broken away from the Mughal Empire with fewer changes in its administrative structure its territory was geographically diverse since it included fertile, lower Ganges alluvial flatland, the less productive Bihar planes, the semiarid uplands in the west and the fertile but remote southern seaboard. During the year of the following study, the state collected taxes from intermediaries variously such as Zamindars, Talukdars or Maliks who in turn collected rent from the peasantry, reformed portions and delivered it to the Royal Treasury.<sup>6</sup> The rental assessment was generally high equivalent to half of the gross output, but the lands gifted to religious personalities, mosques and temples offered to community of peasants for development of cultivation attracted lower rents.<sup>7</sup> This justifies the fact that social economy of Bengal was in stability with natural endowments and agriculture remained the major factor that behold Bengal for further economic development. Even in More's Utopia he states that each Utopian city is surrounded by farmland and every family irrespective of any profession, gender, class status, contributes in agriculture work. And also, in England and Europe, agricultural work remained an occupation of the poor, disdained by those with any form of wealth.<sup>8</sup> But in **Utopia**, those class distinctions have been broken down as working on land is a necessary part of life and work has been removed as a stigma. Not only Bengal but England and Britain both transformed the wool and agricultural market into an oligopoly that simultaneously raised prices and deprived small landholders of their livelihood whereas Utopian market system does not operate on any market constructions

The period of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century was major witness for the developing peak of Bengal during 1947, which has been considered as a devastating age since it dismantled the entire backbone of the country. Politically, socially and majorly economic devastation was held high. Bengal further witnessed a catastrophic situation as it faced partitioned on religious terms. In her article, professor Barnita Bagchi elaborately discussed two Bengali novels by Satinath Bhaduri's Jagari and Dhorai Charit Manas. It analyses them as examples of vernacular Indian utopian literature, with specific reference to competing visions of utopia as crystallized in the anti-colonial Quit India Movement in India and to Gandhian notions of utopia.<sup>9</sup> Neither of these novels adopts the well-known and canonical Eurocentric format of a utopian novel, in which a traveler from the outside world goes to a utopian country. Bhaduri's two novels, rather, show us how inhabitants of India in the very last years of British colonialism engage in social dreaming, with Gandhian utopia, and critiques thereof, as central themes. Gandhi's modern and radically non-Eurocentric reinvention of utopia-driven through the topoi of Ramrajya, of the ashram as Utopian locus and of the oceanic circle of future Indian villages-demands a reconsideration of Utopian writing.<sup>10</sup>

The first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century is known to be as severe struggling period for Bengal and for India as well. It was a time when India was trying hard to get rid from the shackles of British government. Various strategies were also taken by the nationalist reformers to uplift self-dependency of the country. During the Non-Co-operation movement Gandhiji's 'Spinning Wheel' or 'Charkha' became an emblem of self-reliance, perseverance and determination for the Indians and it became a milestone for the spinning industry. As compared to other nationalists, Rabindranath Tagore's contribution was immense by establishing a school in Shantiniketan that was modeled on modern education that opened a gateway for Indians from aesthetic development. Tagore's ideology of 'atmashakti' or 'self-reliance' was developed

on the notion that India would discard foreign help or goods and would utilize its own resources for restructuring its pathetic outlook. A noted Historian Sumit Sarkar in his magnum opus *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, try to elaborate tagore's idea of self-reliance and conceptualized the ideal society which is ordinary people really want.<sup>11</sup> Rabindranath Tagore was categorically clear about the real political work that remained undone in the country. He believed that all our energies must be directed to alleviate poverty, to inculcate amity amongst communities and all manner of people and to foster values of freedom and self-reliance, 'atmashakti'. Swaraj for him was not just political freedom but freedom from hunger, disease, servitude and ignorance.<sup>12</sup>

Whereas Nehru supported Civil Rights Movement and appeared in the onset of Non-Co-operation Movement as he played a leading role for the development of international outlook of India that would gather a recurring support for an innate progress of the country. In his outstanding work, Benjamin Zachariah tries to elaborate the Nehruvian ideal society and conceptualized the term 'Development'.<sup>13</sup> The ideas in his book were crucial for the articulation of a vision of a future independent India. Such ideas were organized around notions of 'development' a term which encompassed far more than the narrowly economic meaning to which it was later reduced. These wider conceptions of 'development' were crucial to attempts to legitimize models of ordering the society of a future India; and the debates surrounding them were crucial to the formation of the language of legitimacy which was to become the obligatory rhetoric of politics in post-independence India.<sup>14</sup> These respective years only fueled collapse and restructuring of boundaries of India and Bengal before independence the years before 1950 stands as an evident here for the above argument. New country was structured as East Pakistan, later renamed as Bangladesh in 1971. The era of Bidhan Chandra Roy was an extreme situation of political and economic turmoil because during Bidhan Chandra Roy's chief -minister ship least number of manufacturing industries were constructed in the state. Food crisis remained a recurrent massive event to be counted during 1967 also major peasant riots upraised which was also to be known as Naxalbari movement, it is often said that this movement was violently pressed by Bengals government. 1970s and 80s were witnessed as hard times when severe power shortages, strikes and riots were common issues. Not only this led to downfall of Bengal's infrastructure but also destabilized its economy. The catastrophic turmoil of political wave was extracting all other fields, the socio-economy couldn't arrive at any chance for building itself up because of ineffective and unskilled governments. Politics not only ruined its own space of conduct but disrupted other fields such as economy majorly and ignited religious chaos. The social economic relevance of Bengal Presidency raised in collaboration with neo- classical economy and rational choice theory during the latter period of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The arrival of private sectors initiated when individuals started supporting oneself through private benefits escaping from government hustle bustles as collecting individual goods as it also contributed in beneficiaries of societal good as well. We should keep this in mind that keeping the individual in epic center the society oscillates around him, mass of individual constructs the social anthology of any place then development initiates. Economy can be started primarily with individual skills then individual action and finally sowing the formulation for government economic policies. Since Bengal had to face extreme decentralization it took years to gear up its economic zone. The huge ascending and descending class contradiction were another major factor that led accumulation of wealth in few rich classes and the outcome was collapse of lower orders to gain wealth. Wealth seemed luxurious as a terminology as the later 20<sup>th</sup> century was proven period where Bengal's economy mostly depended on primary sector, mainly agriculture but government couldn't tackle the situation and rather tempted violence on the farmers and

peasants which ultimately led to havoc unemployment and finally deprived their basic requirements. Both later regained encouragement from the side of regional ownership by the elite and the incentive for production resulted acceleration of economic development in Bengal. Also, entrepreneurship during 1990s and capitalist transformation in agriculture boosted economy of Bengal, though a form of leisure class still existed who expense huge amounts of wealth in marriage, birthdays and deaths. From this zone no such economic encouragement could be gathered or hoped. Though the socio-economy of Bengal has to come up with the bias of urban economy and rural economy. Calcutta became an emblem of metropolis for Western education, modern culture and print media as they were reaching zenith, which the Britishers left behind. But rural economy was as usual backward. Therefore, the entire economic development of Bengal was burdened on the shoulders of Calcutta as new prospects, resources, locations, and urban beneficiaries favored it. Foreign rule was humiliating though brought gifts of modern culture, especially woman education, new sectors were raising up, adding to socio-economic developments. This led production and invention of new ideas and machinery in agricultural fields. The economy was becoming diversified with promotion in exportation of ready-made garments, shrimps to its neighboring countries. Also, qualitative changes received transformation in education and health care during the latter part of 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-economic potentiality. Technological inventions led to improvised computers and was effective in setting up of joint sectors with the bliss of government and private ownership like IT sectors, hospitals, education, institution, and universities. More than first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century suffered destabilization in all related fields but with the boon of advanced time and technology it ushered enlightenment in developing phase. So, we can state that 20<sup>th</sup> century socio-economy of Bengal transformed a dystopian state of Bengal into a new hope for the future Utopian state of frame work. In his book, Peter Beilharz argues Socialism and Modernity are fundamentally interrelated. In correcting the conflation of Marxism, Bolshevism, and Socialism that occludes contemporary political thinking, he reopens a space for discussion of what socialist politics might look like in the present state of post-communist-postcolonial-postmodern moment.<sup>15</sup>

Now, standing at the threshold of Bengals developing economy, West Bengal serves as a gateway for Southeast Asian countries. In the wake of increased trade with countries such as China, Japan, Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia, East Indian ports have become active hubs in the recent times which is expected to generate business opportunities and growth for states in the region. Bengal do finitely possess urban and social infrastructure have manufacturing excellence, leverage its position in agriculture, and focuses on rapid growth in the service sector. The state has been witnessing a spark in economic activity led by economic reforms. Among the major beneficiaries of this upsurge, one is infrastructure sector which has emerged as a prime driver for positive social change in the state. Social infrastructure and urban infrastructure are a subset of infrastructure sector and plays significant role in generating revenue for the economy. In the past few years, the sector has evolved to become one of the largest employers in the state. Further, it provides strong impetus to Urbanization and contribute significantly to the overall development of the economy. There's least doubt that urban and social infrastructure have enough contribution for unleashing West Bengal's economic potential. With Urbanization on the rise, educational institutes help centers IT infrastructure and commercial centers are crucial requirements of state social infrastructure and real Estates plays a pivotal role in fulfilling this requirement. These sectors remain the backbone of socio-economic deliverance for Bengal. It has been established that despite the sector significant contribution to the development of West Bengal, it remains far from government priority. The need of the hour is for the government to perform a transformation role and works toward the planned evolution of state in both

urban and social infrastructure which can sustain affordability and satisfy ever growing housing requirement. Also, continuous support in the form of liberal regulations and policies. Infrastructure stands among the most important contributors to the economy of the state. As the sector has emerged as one of the largest employer providing direct as well as indirect employment, social infrastructure has also stimulated the demand in industry such as IT/ ITES, hotel, health -care, education institutes and others by creating the right infrastructure for their existence as it aims to uplift development from social economic perspective and would further nourish stability to other fields as well.

According to Frederick Engels “Modern Socialism is, in its essence, the direct product of the recognition, on the one hand, of the class antagonisms, existing in the society of to-day, between proprietors and non-proprietors, between capitalists and wage-workers; on the other hand, of the anarchy existing in production. But, in its theoretical form, modern Socialism originally appears ostensibly as a more logical extension of the principles laid down by the great French philosophers of the eighteenth century. Like every new theory, modern Socialism had, at first, to connect itself with the intellectual stock-in-trade ready to its hand, however deeply its roots lay in material economic facts.”<sup>16</sup> Utopian society not only encourages development but development in a healthy manner. Eradication of class structure, sustainable development, equity among people, organic and eco-friendly nature, as this would further add development from socio economic perspective as well. Though eradication of class structure might be challenging but government should encourage reforms that would provide affordable services to not so well of classes. The government should set up vigorous employment and reassure better employment opportunities so that they not only fulfill their basic but necessity as well. If the population constituting the poor and the deprived does not uplift itself then it would count for Bengals underdevelopment as well. Development in the sense nurturing the resources for the future use rather than exploiting those essentials, strategies to be adopted how new resources could be utilized, also adding renewable resources into calculation and tracing ways for developments. The government should keep this in mind that the burden of one class must not fall on other classes, every individual irrespective of caste, creed, sex, race, gender have equal responsibility for its society as per their status.

Though Utopian world as per Thomas More stands unified perfect, an epitome of ideal society. As we mentioned earlier the developing sectors of education, health -care, affirms our foundations for Bengals development in Utopia. Also, irrespective of what status an individual belongs, the educational system is evident in the fact that every Utopian child receives thorough education. The Utopians believe that it is through education that the values and dispositions of citizens are molded. While most Utopians are engaged in manual labor as a career in their free time, Utopians, choose to follow intellectual pursuits even all their studies are conducted in native language, so Bengal should execute policies of better education and that it may reach every child. If it's not affordable, it is government's responsibility to work on this issue. Health -care in Utopia is so well planned and equipped with everything necessary to restore health.<sup>17</sup> The care provided is so gentle and attentive, but the hospitals in Bengal are hardly affordable as it is luxurious. Like Utopia, Bengal also has skilled medical specialists but one can gather their consultation only at a high fee. Irrespective of poor and rich, every individual has the right to receive a thorough a perfect health care. So, this sector needs to moulded itself much for further development.<sup>18</sup> As mentioned earlier that IT sector is providing extraordinary services and employment opportunities. Though in YouTube beer nothing has been mentioned as such as it was written 500 years ago, but mentioning of arithmetic astronomy, logic, geometry has been mentioned, which is a combined upgraded sector. We

know as Information Technology as the former mentioned terms were formulated for the foundations of technology, computer and Internet etc.

Therefore, we may conclude that Bengal certain sectors, like education, health -care and IT forms have developed far beyond then our expectation if these sectors are upgraded with exceptional policies, we may arrive for a hope of Utopian society. It may not be perfect, but proud to pronounce Bengal to be a developed city then developing as the former sector would further encourage development to other sectors connected to them. Utopia also had its ambiguity, so it would be wrong to synonym utopia to be an ideal society. It's rather close to Ideal Society for certain exaggerated are humans. Finally, we don't want Bengal to be Utopia, but a perfect state with upgraded embodiments and humanist rational ideas.

### Work Cited:

1. Plato, *Republic*, Books 1-10 (United States: Agora Publications, Incorporated, 2001).
2. Thomas More, *Utopia* (United States: Dover Publications, 2012).
3. Esa Mangeloja and Tomi Ovaska, "Sir Thomas More's Utopia: An Overlooked Economic Classic," in *Economic Affairs*, ed. J.R. Shackleton (The University of Buckingham, 2019).
4. Tirthankar Roy, "Economic Conditions in Early Modern Bengal: A Contribution to the Divergence Debate," *Journal of Economic History* 70 (Cambridge University Press): 179-194.
5. Saibal Gupta, *Economic History of Bengal Presidency*, Economic, IGC South Asia Growth Conference, Dhaka, 2012.
6. Tirthankar Roy, "Economic Conditions in Early Modern Bengal: A Contribution to the Divergence Debate," 179-194.
7. Ibid.
8. Thomas More, *Utopia*, Translated into English by Gilbert Burnet (Glasgow, 1821).
9. Barnita Bagchi, "Satinath Bhaduri's Bengali Novels *Jagari* (The Vigil) and *Dhorai Charit Manas* as Utopian Literature," ResearchGate, 2019.
10. Ibid.
11. Sumit Sarkar, *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (People's Publishing House, 1973).
12. Debjani Sengupta, "The Relevance of Rabindranath Tagore's Politics on His 158th Birth Anniversary," *The Wire*, 2019.
13. Benjamin Zachariah, *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History 1930-1950* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
14. Ibid., XV.
15. Peter Beilharz, *Socialism and Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
16. Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Charles H. Kerr & Company, Chicago, 1908), 47.
17. Neal Roese, "Does Utopia Have Hospitals?," *Finding Utopia: Questing for the Perfect Society*, Part 2, July 2015..
18. "Real Estate and Construction: Importance of Urban and Social Infrastructure in Economic Growth of Bengal," Credai Bengal, KPMG.com/in.2014.