

# BANGLADESH: THE BOOSTER ENGINE

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In 1969, the whole world was mesmerized when three US astronauts made a successful voyage to the moon and back. The booster engine that lifted the rocket so it could break free of the earth's atmosphere was jettisoned and left in the Atlantic Ocean. The astronauts' landing on the moon, their return to earth, and many other associated events captured the world's imagination, but the booster vanished from the scene.

My purpose in this essay is to highlight the historic role of Bangladesh—along with the historical province of Bengal, the eastern two-thirds of which constitutes the nation of Bangladesh—as an economic “booster engine” that benefitted many of today's most powerful countries, particularly Great Britain. This image contrasts starkly with the longstanding, now outdated, portrayal of Bangladesh as an economic “basket case.” The nation's past role as an economic booster can shed some light on how Bangladesh quietly transformed itself from a basket case to a showcase in the 50 years since its independence.

I begin by going back 300 years to the central role Bengal played during a pivotal period of history. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Bengal was among the most prosperous places on earth. The name Bangladesh was used in Bengal for several centuries before 1971, when the country gained independence, but it entered the

world's vocabulary only at that time, which contributed to the new nation's dissociation from the rich history of Bengal. Today, Bangladesh conjures up images of famine and abject poverty, which were a significant and tragic part of its history. This difficult period began in 1757, but prior to that, the territory of present-day Bangladesh was the core of Bengal's agricultural and manufacturing success. The remaining one-third of Bengal is now West Bengal, one of India's 28 states.

In this essay, I briefly address the apparent clash between the thesis that Bengal boosted the West and the theory that the Western nations got rich through their superior institutions and innovations. I then describe six ways that Bengal, including the large area that is now Bangladesh, contributed to the development of the West. I conclude by briefly highlighting a key reason Bangladesh is ascending anew today.

## ON THE CONSENSUS VIEW OF THE WEST'S PROGRESS

Among Western historians and economists, the consensus view is that the West grew rich due to its distinct institutions of property rights and its capacity for innovation. Institutions of property rights refers to the rule of law wherein an economic producer can generally be assured that the value he or she creates will not be forcibly taken away. For example, Nobel laureate Douglass North (1990) famously asserted in his seminal work, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, that

the central puzzle of human history is to account for the divergent path of historical change. How have societies diverged? . . . The answer hinges on the difference between institutions and organizations and the interactions between them that shape the direction of the institutional change. Institutions, together with the standard constraints of economic theory, determine the opportunities in a society. Organizations are created to take advantage of those opportunities, and, as the organizations evolve, they alter institutions. (6-7)

More recently, in their widely acclaimed book *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2012) explained the success or failures of nations based on inclusive or extractive political institutions. They state that “England was unique among nations . . . [that established] institutions that would have profound implications not only for economic incentives and prosperity, but also [for] who would reap the benefits of prosperity” (102). They continue: “Countries become failed states . . . because of the legacy of extractive institutions, which concentrate power and wealth in the hands of those controlling the state, opening the way for unrest, strife, and civil war” (376).

I concur that the West, particularly Holland and Great Britain, gradually developed such institutions more effectively than the rest of the world, beginning roughly 800 years ago. Examples first emerged in Great Britain around 1180, when Common Law was introduced, followed by the Magna Carta in 1215, a document that played an important role in curtailing arbitrary monarchical power. These gave rise to clearer property rights, an ever-stronger Parliament, and further curtailment of arbitrary power. These political developments, combined with commercial progress, led

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to more effective laws that allowed innovations to flourish. As a result, the people of Western countries enjoyed greater freedom and generally lived better lives than people elsewhere at the time, though of course any ideal of absolute equity or social perfection was not achieved. I will refer to the various internal drivers of such social progress as institutional developments.

From a global perspective, however, this is only half the story. Let me explain with an analogy. Imagine that a lioness kills a deer *outside* her den and then shares her kill with her cubs *inside* the den; she maintains separate, simultaneous, and symbiotic codes of conduct that are differentially applied “inside” and “outside.”<sup>1</sup> In short, the gentler inside rules are buttressed by the resources taken by force from outside. While Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) may be correct in saying that the presence of inclusive versus extractive institutions is critical to societal outcomes in the long run, and they may recognize that individuals raised in inclusive environments may subsequently set up extractive arrangements, they overlook the separate, simultaneous, and symbiotic relationships existing between inclusive “inside” and extractive “outside” over a long period of time. North also seems to overlook such separate, simultaneous, and symbiotic “inside” with “outside” (with very different characters) that were the norm for centuries, and which arguably still exist today in more subtle forms.

It is easy for those living inside not to see the violence on which their way of life depends. Had a cub who always lived inside the den written about his mother, he would, most likely, overlook his mother’s predation. We can now move from this animal to a human analogy. A man who burgles houses outside his own neighborhood and then uses the money to renovate his own house may well be

seen by his neighbors as an upstanding citizen. Unless a common watchman steps in who is motivated and powerful enough to bring both neighborhoods to comparable conditions, this burglary can continue. Alternatively, we could also think of another scenario for sustained burglary: imagine that a burglar, who is empowered by the prosperity and the consequent better technologies of his “inside” neighborhood, somehow manages to become the watchman of another neighborhood (the “outside”). The burglar can then extract from that “outside” neighborhood on an ongoing basis, possibly capitalizing on the institutional void that exists there. Given that he is now the watchman of the “outside,” he has the power to introduce codes of conduct on the “outside” as he likes, possibly different codes from those of his “inside” neighborhood. This is how different codes of conduct can become embedded in laws and institutions, legitimizing this separation. In this manner, the very institutions that benefit the inside can end up harming the outside.

The distinction between inside and outside can become so natural, especially over time, that it becomes a part of our mental space and culture. The Western champion of liberty, John Stuart Mill, worked for the East India Company (EIC) for 35 years and received multiple promotions. Whatever his justifications for this employment, he must have seen the “inside” and “outside” differently and recognized that people in Great Britain enjoyed far greater liberty than people in India, including Bengal. Mill knew that India was being ruled by a private company that was making money for its shareholders and employees, including himself. In other words, even the most profound Western thinkers can become so engrossed in their theories on the West as generally presented to Western audiences that they treat the outside only as an after-

thought, even when that outside fuels the economy of the inside.

Many serious economic thinkers have the perspective that the accumulation of capital in earlier eras was predation. These thinkers include Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen.<sup>2</sup> Marx recognized the “primitive accumulation” of capital that had taken place through “conquest, enslavement, robbery, briefly force” prior to the modern-day capitalism. (Tucker, eds. 1972, 432) Veblen also has a similar view as to how capital was originally gathered (Veblen 1994). This coercive capital accumulation could be an earlier-stage phenomenon that was generally contained through the institutional developments mentioned above. But the underlying predation-oriented human instincts, if their existence is accepted, could not possibly be eliminated. Granted, there would be some people who would have their inner moral sense activated and they would refrain from predation. But some would behave otherwise and resort to predation. Therefore, when people subject to institutional developments (for example, those from Britain) planted themselves “outside” (for example, in Bengal), their predatory instincts would kick in, at least in some cases, especially if they managed to rule over the “outside” and get to determine what kind of institutions, if any, would be applicable there.

Contemporary historian Sven Beckert claims that coercion is what allows two distinct worlds to exist simultaneously. Beckert (2014) calls this “war capitalism” and claims that it gave rise to modern-day global capitalism:

War capitalism relied on the capacity of rich and powerful Europeans to divide the world into an “inside” and an “outside.” The “inside” encompassed the laws and institutions, and customs of the mother country, where the state

enforced order ruled. The “outside,” by contrast, was characterized by imperial domination, the expropriation of vast territories, decimation of indigenous people, theft of their resources, enslavement, and domination of vast tracts of land by private capitalists with little effective oversight by distant European states. In these imperial dependencies, the rules of the inside did not apply. There, masters trumped states, violence defied the laws, and bold physical coercion by private actors remade markets. (38)

I believe this is an accurate description of the rise of the West, including how Bengal was forced to serve it. Institutional developments in Britain empowered its insiders, who then used their power to usurp and dominate the realms of outsiders who may have remained weaker without comparable institutional developments. At the same time, the insiders’ predatory instincts as identified by Marx and Veblen had not been extinguished by institutional developments. Beckert (2014) finds “a peculiar relationship between . . . states and capital owners.” (31). “Their commitment to armed trade, industrial espionage, prohibition, restrictive trade regulations, domination of territories, capturing of labor, removal of indigenous inhabitants, and state-sponsored creation of territories . . . [was] then left to the far-reaching domination of capitalists who had created a new economic order” (53). This captures what happened to Bangladesh (along with the larger historical Bengal), more closely than the simplistic view that the West got rich through better institutions and innovations.

European aggression abroad was recognized by Alexander Hamilton who, in 1787, appealed to 13 North American states to establish a stronger federal gov-

ernment in order to defend themselves more effectively. Great Britain's aggression was certainly one of the factors that mobilized colonial leaders to write the US Constitution. Hamilton wrote in *The Federalist Papers: No. 11*:

Europe, by her arms and by her negotiations, by force and by fraud, has, in different degrees, extended her dominion over them all. Africa, Asia, and America have successively felt her domination. The superiority she has long maintained has tempted her to plume herself as the Mistress of the World, and to consider the rest of mankind as created for her benefit . . . It belongs to us . . . to teach that assuming brother, moderation. Union will enable us to do it.

I believe the booster role played by Bengal and Bangladesh can shed some revealing light on this issue.

## THE HISTORICAL SETTING

Bangladesh comprises about two-thirds of the eastern part of ancient Bengal (62% by land mass, 65% by population), which was part of India until 1947. William Dalrymple (2019) summarizes the region's sources of wealth in the 17th century:

"[Bengal was] the finest and the most fruitful country in the world," according to the French traveler Francois Bernier. It was one of "the richest most populous and best cultivated countries," agreed the Scot Alexander Dow. With a myriad of weavers—25,000 in Dhaka alone—and unrivalled luxury textile production of silk and woven muslin of fabulous delicacy, it was by the end of the seventeenth century Europe's single most important supplier of goods

in Asia and much the wealthiest region of the Mughal Empire, the place fortunes could most easily be made. (25-26)

Bengal had been a strong player in agriculture and fabric manufacturing since ancient times, and these strengths attracted the Dutch, French, Portuguese, and English traders from at least the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta) became academically and culturally prominent in the 1770s, overshadowing the eastern part of Bengal in those respects. However, the eastern part of Bengal that makes up Bangladesh today was, at the time, stronger in agriculture and in the production of cotton fabrics. This may have been attributable to the region's numerous rivers, particularly the Padma (the Ganges in India), which flows eastward as it goes south into the Bay of Bengal. Since antiquity, the riverine character of Bengal had promoted a division of labor—and thus a relatively more sophisticated economy—by facilitating internal trade, as Adam Smith recognized (Sutherland 1993, 29-30). Because of the importance of the eastern region of Bengal, Dhaka (now the capital of Bangladesh) was the political, commercial, and manufacturing center. Dhaka and the port city of Chittagong both have a history that goes back at least a thousand years.

For political reasons, the capital of Bengal was moved westward to Murshidabad in 1702 and then to Kolkata; both cities are in present day West Bengal in India. After the conquest of Bengal in 1757, the EIC made Kolkata the capital of Bengal and of British India. As the city that served the administrative, academic, and cultural needs of British India, Kolkata grew rapidly. Meanwhile, Dhaka began to lose its luster in 1702 when it lost its status as the capital; its cotton fabric production subsequently died

out under British rule. However, Dhaka became important again in 1905, when Bengal was divided into East and West and Dhaka was made the capital of East Bengal. The city experienced rapid growth again after 1971, when it was made the capital city of newly independent Bangladesh.

## **THE SIX BOOSTER ROLES OF BANGLADESH**

My definition of a booster is an actor that plays a pivotal role in generating identifiable and substantial results at a meaningful cost to itself. An object that simply inspires is not a booster. Here I describe six booster roles played by Bangladesh:

- Seeding a British Political Dynasty
- Constituting the Beginning the British Empire beyond Its Émigré Countries
- Setting the Stage for the American Revolution and Birth of the United States
- Providing the Context for the British Industrial Revolution
- Expanding and Defending the British Empire
- Prompting the Development of International Humanitarian Law

### **Seeding a British Political Dynasty**

On December 31, 1599, Queen Elizabeth I granted a royal charter to the EIC to trade in Asia. This charter granted the company exclusive rights within her realm but not in Asia, where the EIC was competing with Dutch, French, and other countries' trading companies. In fact, when trade with Bengal turned out to be extremely lucrative, the EIC sometimes encountered competition from its own enterprising employees, who would desert the company after arriving in Bengal and attempt to trade on their own. At the time, Dhaka was the capital of Bengal. In 1682, the chief officer of the EIC in Bengal went to

the court of the Mughal governor in Dhaka to seek both tax relief and help in stopping these interlopers. The governor was not persuaded, and the Mughal rulers expressed their desire to be a "neutral broker between different groups of its subjects" (Wilson 2016, 29).

"In the 1680s, the most important of these 'interlopers' was Thomas Pitt" (Wilson 2016, 28). He left Bengal "with ships stuffed with goods to sell in England. He reached England in February 1683 where the profits from his trade enabled him to buy a manor in Wiltshire, and then the parliamentary seat of Salisbury" (43). The fine Pitt paid for breaking the EIC's monopoly was simply a cost of doing business; although he had subsequently gone to India to accumulate more wealth, the profits from his enterprise in Bengal enabled Pitt to lay the foundation for a political dynasty. His son Robert (1680-1727) became a member of parliament, and his grandson, William Pitt the Elder (1708-1778), became prime minister of Britain. However, Pitt the Elder did not like being reminded of the origins of his family's wealth (Dalrymple 2019, 223), an interesting example of how boosters get forgotten. Incidentally, Pitt the Elder was the prime minister of Britain when the EIC took over Bengal in 1757, the year Pitt the Younger (Thomas Pitt's great grandson) was born; he became prime minister of Britain in 1784. His brother John fought for the British in the American War of Independence and served in several senior military and political roles, including Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Trade in Bengal, whether through the EIC or as an interloper, enriched many people, including Britain's politically powerful families. The EIC's 2,000 shareholders were largely among the British power elite. At what cost was Bengal such a key booster for the fortunes of outsiders? The cost became apparent over the

long run, as the EIC, greatly enriched by its trade with Bengal, strove to control interlopers and push out other European trading companies, and eventually ended up with political control of Bengal.

### **Constituting the Beginning the British Empire beyond Its Émigré Countries**

The EIC began doing business in Bengal in the 1630s and enriching its shareholders in Britain. Although the Mughal empire had been declining in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the rulers of various provinces, including the *Nawab* (governor) of Bengal, never suspected that a trading company could ever become a sovereign ruler. The lack of appreciation of the threat the EIC posed helped it become stronger. The company established a military presence in Bengal as early as 1696, when Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb allowed it to build Fort William in Kolkata.

To be sure, EIC officers were frustrated by not having complete control of the lucrative goods being produced in Bengal. The company had to pay taxes on what was exported from Bengal to England and had to compete with other European companies, which led to small skirmishes and an exchange of insults with the local authorities. “The idea that East India Company should conquer land in India did not begin in England. It started among officers in Bengal itself, frustrated with fractious relationship with Mughal authorities” (Wilson 2016, 44). In short, the British company did not have formal ambitions to take over Bengal, and the Bengalis did not appear to consider that a possibility—until it was too late.

The EIC attempted to build more forts, which irked the Nawab, although these forts were only good for defense, not conquest. More importantly, it took four to six months to travel by sea from

Britain to Bengal, which made it nearly impossible for the EIC to bring an army from Europe. The company also could not recruit too many local mercenaries, as any attempt to do so would have been noticed and countered by the Nawab; his army had close to 100,000 men. The EIC officers’ frustrations went on until 1756, when Siraj-ud Dawla, the 24-year-old grandson of Nawab Alivardi Khan (considered a wise ruler of Bengal from 1740-1756), was crowned the new Nawab of Bengal.

After an alleged exchange of insults between EIC men and those of Siraj-ud Dawla in late 1756, the impetuous young Nawab wanted to teach the British a lesson. He assembled a force of about 70,000 men and stormed Fort William. The EIC force numbered only about 250 (Dalrymple 2019, 100), and the young Nawab succeeded in capturing the fort. A few months later, one Robert Clive, who had distinguished himself within the company for his bravery against the French, made an attempt to take the fort back. One early dawn in January 1757, Clive ambushed the Nawab’s men and managed to kill quite a few. This led the Nawab to sign a ceasefire, as he apparently also was facing threats from the Western provinces of India.

Jesse Norman (2013) provides a good summary of what happened about six months later:

[A] natural troublemaker who had been expelled by a succession of English schools, Clive entered the Company on the bottom rung in the usual position of “writer” or junior clerk . . . In 1757, [Clive went on to defeat] the Nawab directly at the battle of Plassey . . . The battle of Plassey itself had been less a military engagement than a subtle process of dividing the Nawab from his financial backers

and military commanders, in particular the army paymaster Mir Jafar, who was bribed to defect at a crucial moment. (106-07)

Wilson (2016) notes that the deal between Clive and Mir Jafar “promised [to pay Mir Jafar] more than twelve million rupees [£158 million in 2016 prices] in supposed recompense” (106).

The money, of course, came from Bengal’s treasury. Norman (2013) writes that “Bengal alone had forty million people at this time, or four times the entire population of Great Britain; it was now effectively controlled by few hundred Company men . . . [who also took] control of the entire tax revenue of Bengal, amounting to some £33 million per year” (107). Nawab Siraj-ud Dowla was killed, and Mir Jafar became the puppet Nawab.

Bengal’s conquest by the EIC gave rise to a new form of imperialism. The “empire” was not made up of British émigrés in overseas colonies but, rather, involved dominion over far distant peoples and cultures. Furthermore, at least during the first 100 years (that is, until 1858), this new kind of empire was being ruled by a private company—the EIC. The EIC’s shareholders had a great hold on the British government. However, the British government itself was not ruling Bengal or other parts of India during that time. Smith called this bizarre merchant-sovereign combination “a strange absurdity” (Sutherland 1993, 368) and expounded on its pernicious effects in *The Wealth of Nations*. Frankopan (2015) explains:

The effective conquest of Bengal marked a signal moment in so far as it changed Britain from being a country that supported colonies of its own émigrés to becoming a domain that ruled other peoples . . . Britain found itself administrating peoples who had laws and customs of their own, and having to

work out what to borrow from new communities, what to lend—and how to build a platform that was workable and sustainable. An empire was being born. (279)

### **Setting the Stage for the American Revolution and Birth of the United States**

The conquest of Bengal in 1757 was a massive catastrophe for the province and had far-reaching consequences internationally. “Over £2 million—tens of billions in today’s terms—had been distributed [from the Bengal treasury] as ‘presents’, almost all of it finding its way into the pockets of EIC employees locally . . . By 1770, the price of grain had been driven higher and higher, with catastrophic results as famine kicked in. The death toll was estimated in the millions; even the governor-general declared that a third of the population had died” (Frankopan 2015, 277).

Even if the famine killed only one-tenth of the Bengal’s population (a far more conservative estimate than the governor-general’s one-third), it means that 4 million out of 40 million people perished during that terrible calamity. Although drought and crop failure had sparked the famine, a contributing factor was the administrative chaos resulting from a private British company attempting to rule a province with a population four times larger than Great Britain’s. Another contributing factor was the £2 million reported above by Frankopan were taken by the EIC officers—more accurately, stolen—which resulted in the breakdown of the company’s internal control. As a reference point, the British government’s annual budget at that time was about £10 million.<sup>4</sup>

The crisis was too big to be ignored in Britain, as Lock (2006) explains: “In 1767 no one had expressed much concern

about the inhabitants of Bengal. This indifference changed, as information flowed into Britain about India itself, and particularly about the British rule in Bengal” (32). The year of reckoning was 1773, when the British Parliament adopted the Regulating Act to find ways to bring the EIC under direct parliamentary supervision.

The act, however, was not enough; the EIC in fact needed to be rescued. The loss of population in Bengal due to the famine sharply shrank the province’s economy. Output declined at a greater rate than demand, and prices rose sharply. These economic dislocations caused EIC shares to lose value and the company nearly went bankrupt. However, too many powerful people had a stake in the company to let it fail. The EIC “had been capitalized by . . . nearly 2,000 shareholders, heavily drawn from the country’s [Britain’s] political and commercial elite . . . These men used their significant political influence to defend the Company’s commercial monopoly and to defeat various attempts at regulation” (Norman 2013, 106). Given the powerful interests who had invested in the EIC, the British government decided to save it. This required a great deal of money, and the British looked to the North American colonies as a source of cash, as Frankopan (2015) explains: “When Lord North’s government passed the Tea Act in 1773, it thought it had found an elegant solution to pay for the EIC rescue, while also bringing at least part of the tax regime of the American colonies closer into line with Britain’s. It provoked fury among settlers across the Atlantic” (278).<sup>5</sup>

In the North American colonies, the new tax “was a symbol of all that was wrong with Britain itself, where the highest levels of society were in thrall to the greedy, self-serving interest groups enriching themselves at the expense of the

common people” (Frankopan 2015, 278). Resistance among the colonists culminated in the Boston Tea Party, a key event in Colonial America, when local activists dumped the tea cargo of three ships into Boston Harbor. Frankopan (2015) briefly explains how the American Revolution stemmed in part from British efforts to manage the situation in Bengal:

Seen from an American perspective, the chain of events that led to the Declaration of Independence of the United States had a very American context. But from a wider vantage point, the causes can be traced back to the tentacles of British power extending even further . . . London was trying to balance competing demands on opposite sides of the world, and attempting to use revenues generated by taxes in one location to fund expenditures in another, leading to disillusionment, dissatisfaction—and revolt. The pursuit of profits had been relentless, which in turn had spurred a growing sense of self-confidence and arrogance . . . As those in [the] American colonies recognized, there was ultimately little difference between being a subject in one territory controlled from Britain rather than another. If Bengalis could starve to death, why not those living in the colonies, whose rights seemed no better or greater? It was time to go it alone. (278-79)

From the British perspective, it was better to cut their losses in North America and attend to Bengal; the latter was a source of revenue as opposed to a drain on resources. As Peter Thomas (1988) notes, from 1763 to 1775, “the average cost of keeping the British army in North America was £389,752 per year . . . This

was a heavy burden for the British taxpayer, not far off 4 percent of the whole national budget” (516).

The connection between the catastrophe in Bengal and Britain’s loss of the American colonies in the 1770s was acknowledged at the time. In a speech to the House of Commons on July 30, 1784, only three years after British forces surrendered to George Washington, Edmund Burke commented, “We had already lost one empire, perhaps, as a punishment for the cruelties authorized in another” (Kirk 1997, 106).

### **Providing the Context for the British Industrial Revolution**

The British Industrial Revolution, generally recognized to have taken place from 1760 to 1820, has many complex features. The common man’s impression is that the new era was caused by the move from manual power to the steam engine and other new technologies. However, this notion is problematic, as it has been found that “steam power started to have a meaningful impact on aggregate growth only in [the] 1830s” (Frey 2019, 136)—that is, after the British Industrial Revolution had already taken place. One also could argue from a different angle that Britain experienced the Industrial Revolution first because it had the most advanced institutional developments, as described above. Sorting out these different explanations of the origins of the Industrial Revolution is in itself a substantial topic.

For my purposes, I find it sufficient to embrace noted British historian Eric Hobsbawm’s (1999) perspective on this topic. In his book *Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution*, Hobsbawm writes, “Whoever says Industrial Revolution says cotton . . . The British Industrial Revolution was by no means *only* cotton, or Lancashire or even

textiles, and cotton lost its primacy within it after a couple of generations. Yet cotton was the pacemaker of industrial change, and the basis of the first regions which could not have existed but for industrialization, and which expressed a new form of society, industrial capitalism, based on a new form of production, the ‘factory’” (34).

Britain, of course, did not grow cotton. When the EIC started going to Bengal and other parts of Asia in the early 1600s, most Europeans did not even know about cotton. They generally relied on linen and wool. Historically, multiple varieties of cotton were grown in locations around the world, India, Egypt, and Mexico among them. This gave rise to several centers of excellence in manufacturing cotton textiles. Bengal, particularly Dhaka, was one such a center. The region soon began to supply muslin, a sought-after luxury since Roman times, to Europe.

Making good use of Beckert’s (2015) thorough research on the global history of cotton, I have identified six ways in which Bengal boosted Britain’s cotton industry and, in effect, helped to spark its Industrial Revolution.

**First**, Bengal exposed European traders and merchants to muslin, one of the highest quality cotton fabrics, which created great demand for such fabrics in Europe. For centuries, Dhaka “had been the source of the world’s highest-quality cottons. The East India company as early as 1621 imported an estimated fifty thousand pieces of cotton goods into Britain. Forty years later, this number had increased a by a factor of five. Cotton cloths, in fact, became the company’s most important trading good; by 1766 that cloth constituted more than 75 percent of East India Company’s total exports” from Asia to Europe (Beckert 2015, 33). As much larger quantities of Indian cotton traveled to Europe, new

markets and fashions emerged. Beautiful chintzes and muslins (a Dhaka specialty) attracted the attention of the growing class of Europeans who had the money to purchase them and the desire to flaunt their social status by wearing them. As Indian cottons became ever more fashionable in the eighteenth century, the desire to replace these imports was a powerful incentive to ramp up cotton production in England and eventually to revolutionize it (35).

**Second**, the growing demand for cotton in Europe expanded English industrialists' desire to acquire the know-how needed to establish facilities in England. The EIC made every effort to extend its control over the entire textile supply chain, including manufacturing processes. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, the English merchants had subcontracted to the local traders 8-10 months before their desired dates of fabric delivery; the local traders then advanced money to weavers conveying the specifications of the English merchants. The finished cloth then "travelled the same chain back to the English factory in Dhaka where merchants graded and prepared it for shipment." (Beckert 2015, 34). Beckert (2015) explains:

The power of European merchants in India was hence significant, but far from all-encompassing: The English complained that the system was frequently disrupted by "Arabians and Moguls who trade in Dacca [Dhaka] . . ." as well as by the "contest, trouble, and charge" of the weavers and local banias . . . The insertion of armed European merchants into the Asian trade . . . slowly marginalized these older networks, as they muscled the once dominant Indian and Arab traders out of many intercontinental markets . . . By the 1730s, the Dhaka factory . . . hosted a contingent of

military personnel and arms to protect its interests. (34-35, 43)

**Third**, another key step in acquiring the desired know-how about cotton production was to learn about the specific weaves and associated technologies, both areas in which Bengal excelled. "By the mid-eighteenth century, Bengal supplied more than one-third of the cotton cloth used in Europe, and was a key innovator in manufacturing" (Novak 1993, 57). "Manufacturers in Europe felt more and more pressure to appropriate these [Bengali] technologies in order to compete both on price and on quality with Indian producers. Europe's movement toward manufacturing cotton textiles was based, in fact, on what might be considered one of history's most dramatic instances of industrial espionage" (Beckert 2015, 49). Novak (1993) explains that the Europeans made a conscious effort to learn this process. A French traveler "admired in 1807 the qualities of Indian yarn and cloth ('a degree of perfection far beyond what we are familiar with in Europe') and once again reported in minute detail on Indian manufacturing techniques, in the hopes of enabling French artisans to copy them: 'All the weaving combs in France should be made according to the model used in Bengal . . . Then we will succeed in equaling the Indians in the manufacture of their muslin'" (50).

**Fourth**, the desire to control various manufacturing processes and the actual extent of control (described in the last few paragraphs) dramatically increased when the EIC became the sovereign of Bengal in 1757. For a private company to be converted overnight into a state is so unheard of that many Western readers still miss the significance of this unprecedented phenomenon: the EIC ruled Bengal, and later additional parts of India, for more than 100 years (1757-1858). Although the

EIC had extended control over cotton farmers, yarn makers, traders, and weavers for at least a century before 1757 (sometimes with armed guards supervising factories), becoming the state resulted in its all-encompassing control of the cotton supply chain. Where the EIC previously had sought to bend the law, it now became the law maker.

**Fifth**, in Bengal, weavers had controlled their own work, owned their own tools, and were able to sell products to any buyers they chose. As demand rose, they could command higher prices for their output. The gradual increase of British control meant a gradual loss of power and eventually a complete loss of independence for the weavers of Bengal. Not long afterward, the center of textile manufacturing shifted to England. As the Bengali textile industry collapsed, once-prosperous weavers were reduced to seeking employment in English factories at subsistence or below-subsistence wages. This is not a story of superior manufacturing methods outcompeting older ones; it is a story of force blended with some gradual improvement of methodology.

With that, Bengal's role as a booster of Britain's Industrial Revolution came to a close. Using the term "spinners" for weavers, Beckert (2015) describes this turn of events:

In 1800, commercial resident John Taylor wrote a detailed history of the clothing industry in the Bengali city of Dhaka and reported that the value of cloth exports there had fallen by 50 percent between 1747 and 1797. Spinners especially had been hurt by British competition, and as a result a great number . . . "died of famine." The people of a once thriving manufacturing city had been "reduced and impoverished," its houses "ruined and abandoned," and its commer-

cial history became "a melancholy retrospect." The "ancient celebrity" and "great wealth" of Dhaka were all but gone. (75)

**Sixth**, the transition of manufacturing from Bengal—and from the rest of India—to Britain was hastened by favorable taxes on British exports to India. The EIC ruled Bengal and—as I have noted—enjoyed massive influence on the British government in London. Responsive to this influence, the British imposed low tariffs on British exports to India while imposing perversely high taxes on domestically produced fabrics consumed in India, including Bengal (Novak 1993, 80). The net effect as far as cotton fabrics were concerned was that the Industrial Revolution inside Britain was mirrored by a deindustrialization process in Bengal and other parts of India.

We can appreciate the importance of the industrialization/deindustrialization dynamic most clearly if we look at the Industrial Revolution through the lens of market scale. Most products consumed after the Industrial Revolution existed before the revolution. The revolution accomplished the mass production of existing products rather than the widespread introduction of new products. Consequently, the Industrial Revolution necessarily required both lining up a huge supply of raw materials and securing control of a large market. Only when situated between large-scale sources of supply and demand could the machines that enabled mass production be utilized economically. Paying undue attention to the artifacts of mass manufacturing rather than the economic and political system that made mass manufacturing possible, economic historians have tended to exaggerate the significance of technological innovation while largely failing to grasp the role of political control in enabling the Industrial Revolution. It was not through the insti-

tutional developments I described earlier but by creating an empire that Britain was able to accomplish the dramatic increase in the “extent of the market” (to use Adam Smith’s famous phrase) that arguably permitted it to experience the Industrial Revolution before other European countries—a point supported by Beckert. A vastly increased scale was possible because Britain now controlled the supply of cotton and distribution of fabric—employing force when necessary. According to Beckert (2015), “Europeans became important to the world of cotton not because of new inventions, or superior technologies, but because of their ability to reshape and then dominate global cotton networks . . . The muscle of armed trade enabled the creation of a complex, Eurocentric maritime trade web” (30).

Returning to the issue of institutional developments in the context of the cotton industry, Beckert (2015) asserts that “the first industrial nation, Great Britain, was hardly a liberal, lean state with dependable but impartial institutions as it is often portrayed. Instead it was an imperial nation characterized by enormous military expenditures, a nearly constant state of war, a powerful and interventionist bureaucracy, high taxes, skyrocketing government debt, and protectionist tariffs—and it was certainly not democratic” (xiv-xv). While institutional developments inside Britain may be rightly celebrated, the country depended heavily on military force to secure its power over the outside, beginning with Bengal.

### **Expanding and Defending the British Empire**

After gaining access to Bengal’s treasury in 1757 and the right to collect taxes in that province, the EIC spent some of its newly acquired funds to expand its control beyond Bengal; some, of course, was used to pay dividends to its shareholders.

According to Novak, surplus money in the form of tribute and taxes from Bengal contributed to the EIC’s expansion across the rest of India and eventually of the British Empire across the rest of the world. Like any other business, the EIC used the income from its existing assets (Bengal being the first such asset) to acquire new territories. As Novak writes, “thanks to Bengal’s wealth and army, the British were able to conquer India and send home vast riches that helped underwrite Britain’s supremacy in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Indeed, without Bengal, The British Empire is unlikely to have survived Napoleon” (Novak 1993, 77).

The EIC launched numerous wars of expansion inside India with money and other resources coming from Bengal. The British government apparently expected the EIC to make Bengal “advantageous to Britain,” not just to serve the EIC’s interests. As Peter Marshal (1987) writes:

While accepting that they had a duty to make Bengal “advantageous” to Britain, those who managed the Company’s affairs in Calcutta concentrated most of their energy on ensuring the “political safety” of their provinces. They interpreted this to mean that they must maintain a very large army and they should be prepared to use it against their neighbours [other provinces in India]. The army had a first call on their resources. When the British were establishing their rule in Bengal in the period 1761-2 to 1770-1, figures produced for a parliamentary committee showed that out of a total spending of some £22,000,000, £9,700,000, or 44 per cent had been spent on the army and fortifications in the provinces, while large sums had also been

sent to Madras to sustain wars there. (135)

As Marshall explains, the EIC was spending 44% of the money from the Bengal treasury to hold on to Bengal and expand farther into India. This money did not come from the British treasury; in fact, Britain was having trouble financing its army in North America during the 1760s and 1770s. From 1763 to 1775, as already noted, “the average cost of keeping the British army in North America was £389,752” (Thomas 1988, 516). When compared with the resources spent on the British army in North America, we can appreciate the vast sums of money from Bengal that supported the EIC’s expansion into the rest of India, with additional funds used to pay handsome dividends to the EIC shareholders. The latter was able to maintain enormous influence on the British Parliament and the government in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. “Not surprisingly, Francis Baring [chairman of the directors] of the East India Company concluded in 1793 that from Bengal an ‘astonishing Mass of Wealth has flowed . . . into the Lap of Great Britain’” (Beckert 2015, 46)

Bengal’s bankers also played a key role in helping the EIC conquer other parts of India from 1757 to 1858. The upper middle class that emerged in Bengal after 1757 controlled mid-level government posts in Kolkata, peasant agriculture, and trade in the bazaars. This group also lent the EIC money at high interest rates, often 10% to 12%, to finance the company’s wars against other Indian states. Dalrymple (2019) argues that

it was this access to unlimited reserves of credit, partly through stable flows of land revenues, and partly through the collaboration of Indian moneylenders and financiers, that in this period finally gave the Company its edge over

their Indian rivals. It was no longer superior European military technology, nor powers of administration that made the difference. It was the ability to mobilize and transfer massive financial resources that enabled the Company to put the largest and best-trained army in the eastern world into the field . . . By the end of the century, Bengal was annually yielding a steady revenue surplus of Rs25 million [£325 million today]. (329-30)

Bengal’s bankers—particularly the family of Jagath Seth—were arguably the richest in the world at the time. Dalrymple (2019) describes this family: “Controlling the minting, collection and transfer of the revenues of the [Mughal] empire’s riches province [Bengal] from their magnificent Murshidabad palace, the Jagath Seths exercised influence and power . . . [with a] reputation akin to the Rothschilds in nineteenth century Europe” (34).

The EIC’s mechanisms of extraction were by no means limited to the textile trade and finance. The company also installed “tax farmers” who generally were landlord-businessmen belonging to upper-middle-class Bengali families. These tax farmers were protected by the EIC if they collected and delivered revenues on time. If a tax farmer failed to deliver a preset amount of revenue, his tenancy was sold to another existing or aspiring tax farmer. These institutional arrangements worked well for the EIC (and later for British authorities) but inflicted a terrible cost on peasants and small farmers.

Through it all, the EIC remained a private company. Only in 1858, 101 years after the EIC’s takeover of Bengal, did a widespread rebellion throughout India push the British government to assume control over the company—a transition

accomplished by the exchange of EIC shares for British government bonds. Of course, the burden of British rule did not end there. The extractive practices initiated and refined by the EIC were largely continued by the British government once it had assumed administrative control; it held onto them until 1947, when British rule ended.

Not long before the end of British rule, Bengal lost three million lives due to administrative priority being given to the British army during World War II. Novak (1993) explains:

[When] the Japanese occupied Burma on Bengal's border, scarce food was being exported to help the war effort while well-fed British troops occupied the country, and all boats were smashed to prevent capture by the Japanese, thus preventing the transportation to the marketplace of rice grown in the countryside . . . Indeed it was in 1943 . . . that Bengal, the rich and mighty, became in the world's eyes a place of hunger, skeletal people, desperation, and despair . . . In 1943 they were unable to defy anyone. What was had been destroyed, and Bengalis found themselves mired in despair. It was in 1943 that Bengal first acquired the image of the "basket case." (56)

### **Prompting the Development of International Humanitarian Law**

The final booster role relates not to the global political economy but to the equally important domains of international law and the history of ideas.

Edmund Burke, a prominent member of Britain's House of Commons with an international reputation for his political philosophy, made a relentless effort over the span of 22 years to bring justice to the people of Bengal. Burke was a tow-

ering figure in the House of Commons for 30 years, from 1765 to 1795, and is recognized to this day as a profound philosopher of politics. Among his many contributions, Burke conceived the concept of political parties in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, when no such entities existed. According to Jesse Norman (2013), "Burke can be said to be the hinge of Anglo-American, and indeed the world's political modernity" (228).

Burke's engagement with the subject started with the Regulating Act of 1773, which led to the establishment of a five-member select committee in the Parliament that included him. Burke took the engagement very seriously. Thomas Macauley later wrote that "Burke brought his higher powers of intellect to work on statements of facts, and on tables and figures . . . Oppression in Bengal was to him the same thing as oppression in the streets of London" (Innes 1916, 108-09). Burke's efforts from 1773 to 1783 were spent producing 17 reports for the Parliament on the operation of the EIC in Bengal and how it was treating the citizens of that province. "The Ninth Report describes the control and systematic exploitation of Bengal by a gang of criminals, with [Governor General of Bengal Warren] Hastings as their Chief" (Lock 2006, 36).

In April 1783, the coalition government that emerged in Britain was convinced that "the East India Company . . . should be subject to closer parliamentary supervision" (Lock 2006, 36). Burke favored this idea and proposed the India Bill to implement it. In his speech to the House of Commons on June 25, 1783, to gain support for this bill, he pointed out that "the intercourse (for it is not commerce) . . . between Bengal and England . . . is not exchanged in the course of the barter, but is taken away without any return or payment whatsoever. In a commercial light, therefore, England becomes annually bankrupt to Bengal to the

amount nearly of its whole dealing; . . . [this is] tantamount to an annual plunder of its [Bengal's] manufactures and its produce" (Stanlis 1963, 431). In another speech to the House, on December 1, 1783, just prior to the vote on the bill, Burke described the British possessions—namely, Bengal and the smaller adjacent province of Bihar—as “a people for ages civilized and cultivated—cultivated by all the arts of polished life, while we were yet in the woods. There have been . . . princes once of great dignity, authority and opulence . . . If I were to take the whole aggregate of our possessions there, I should compare it, as the nearest parallel I can find, with the Empire of Germany” (449-50). His understanding of Bengal's civilization (and most probably India's, although the EIC primarily ruled Bengal at that time) led to his ambition “to form the Magna Carta of Hindostan,” as he mentioned in the same speech.

However, the EIC's power was immense. In addition to the 2,000 shareholders, largely British elite, who earned handsome dividends from the EIC, “its power had only increased with the influx of new MPs from among the nabobs. After the 1774 general election there were twenty-six nabob MPs; after 1784 there were forty-five” (Norman 2013, 108). The word “nabob,” derived from the Bengali or Indian word Nawab, referred to the nouveau riche who made their fortunes in the East. The “Bengal Squad,” a collection of nabobs who constituted a large bloc of votes in the Parliament, apparently favored the election of Pitt the Younger as prime minister. Pitt was soft on the company, and Burke was “convinced that Pitt's victory in the 1784 election had been materially aided by the ‘Bengal Squad’” (Lock 2006, 36).

The India Bill did not pass in 1783, and a new act was passed in 1784 under Pitt, “ostensibly leaving the company its commercial independence, and on politi-

cal questions effectively subordinated . . . to a ministerial Board of Control” (Lock 2006, 36). In short, the company (not Britain) continued to rule Bengal. Faced with these failures and his discovery of the company's corrupt practices as he produced his reports, Burke decided to bring impeachment charges in 1786 against Warren Hastings, the Governor General of Bengal, which passed in the House of Commons and led to a long trial in the House of Lords, which lasted from 1788 to 1794. However, Burke failed again: Hastings was acquitted in 1795. Burke resigned from Parliament soon thereafter.<sup>6</sup>

Given the Company's influence in the British government, Burke knew he could not convict the former governor general of Bengal: “He privately acknowledged from the outset that it was unlikely to secure a conviction: it would be difficult to obtain evidence from India admissible in an English court, and Hastings was supported by the King and had many friends in the government and across the Lords. But the trial would have such a high profile that conviction might not be necessary for success in the court of public opinion” (Norman 2013, 124).

Indeed, “by holding Warren Hastings pinned at the bar of the House of Lords for nearly eight years, Burke established the principle of accountability in a way that nobody connected with the government of India, or of the empire generally, would ever forget” (O'Brien 1997, 204). As Kirk (1997) argues, “Burke's eloquence, taught in every grammar school and public school, impressed upon the boys who would become colonial officers and members of Parliament some part of Burke's sense of duty and consecration in the civil, social order—with reference to India and empire” (120-21).

What is really telling about Burke's apparent failure is a comment by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*.

Originally published in 1776, Smith added some new thoughts in subsequent editions over the next ten years. Smith had set out to write *The Wealth of Nations* to provide guidance to statesmen and legislators. He believed legislators would work virtuously and adopt policies in the interest of the whole nation, not according to narrow interests. He had championed private property and competitive commerce and despised monopolies like the EIC. He believed that legislators would take action against unfair dealings and promote national interests; his famous book, after all, was about the “wealth of nations” not about the “wealth of individuals.” However, during the 1780s and after the first edition of *The Wealth of Nations* was published, when Smith saw that Burke had failed to pass the India Bill in late 1783 and that the friends of the EIC were getting their way, he must have been very disappointed to see that his legislative remedy was not working.

Although we have no evidence that Smith is referring specifically to Burke in the following comment, he clearly had become disillusioned with what the legislators could do:

This monopoly [is] like an overgrown standing army . . . formidable to the government, and upon many occasions intimidate the legislature. The member of parliament who supports every proposal for strengthening this monopoly, is sure to acquire . . . great popularity and influence with an order of men whose numbers and wealth render them of great importance. If he opposes them, on the contrary, and still more if he has authority enough to be able to thwart them, neither the most acknowledged probity, nor the highest rank, nor the greatest pub-

lick services can protect him from the most infamous abuse and detraction.” (Sutherland 1993, 300)

In other words, Burke’s attempt to take legislative action was not delivering the desired ends. Smith’s faith in a legislative remedy was also not delivering those ends. Both men believed in the underlying human good and universal values, and they saw the institutions failing in the face of the unfettered private interests the EIC represented. However, the power of words, especially from someone as profound as Burke—who is known to be one of the best English orators of all time—left some memorable articulations of justice. These articulations have aided in the establishment of the international criminal courts, prosecution for crimes against humanity, and international human rights. As Hastings argued that British law did not apply outside Britain, Burke pointed to the natural rights of human beings, who should not be subject to arbitrary power no matter where they lived.

**Articulation of natural rights.** Burke addressed the House of Lords on December 1, 1783: “The rights of men—that is to say, the natural rights of mankind—are indeed sacred things; and if any public measure is proved mischievously to affect them, the objection ought to be fatal to that measure . . . If these natural rights are further affirmed and declared by express covenants . . . they are in a still better condition . . . The things secured by these instruments may, without any deceitful ambiguity, be very fitly called the chartered rights of man” (Stanlis 1963, 444).

**Argument against arbitrary power.** Burke addressed the House of Lords on February 16, 1788: “He [Hastings] have arbitrary power! My Lords, The East India Company have not arbitrary power to give him; the king has no arbitrary power

to give him; your Lordships have not; nor the Commons, nor the whole legislature. We have no arbitrary power to give, because arbitrary power is a thing which neither any man can hold nor any man can give. No man can lawfully govern himself according to his own will; much less can one person be governed by the will of another” (Stanlis 1963, 477-78).

**Morality independent of geography.**

Burke spoke during Hastings’ impeachment trial: “Your lordship know that these gentlemen [Hastings and his men] have formed a plan of geographical morality, by which the duties of men, in public and private situations, are not to be governed . . . by their relation to mankind, but by climates, degrees of longitudes, parallels, not of life, but of latitudes: as if, when you have crossed the equinoctial, all the virtues die . . . as if there were a kind of baptism, like that practiced by seamen, by which they unbaptize themselves of all that they learned in Europe, and after which a new order of system of things commenced . . . This geographical morality we do protest against . . . the laws of morality are the same everywhere, and that there is no action which would pass for an act of extortion, of peculation, of bribery, and of oppression in Europe, Asia, Africa and all over the world” (O’Brien 1997, 195-96).

On the surface, Burke’s efforts in the British Parliament may have been thwarted, but his arguments and articulation have lived on. Burke’s language on natural rights and his criticism of arbitrary power and geographical morality have boosted the cause of universal human rights through the international courts. The sacrifices made by the people of Bengal contributed to the history of ideas and are now enshrined in enduring codes of international law.

**FROM FAMINE TO A FIRM FOUNDATION**

I began this essay by framing Bangladesh’s role in global history over the past three centuries as that of a booster engine that propelled the countries of the West—particularly Great Britain—forward into modernity, only to have those substantial contributions go largely unrecognized if not entirely forgotten. Even the people of Bangladesh largely lost track of Bengal’s substantial role in global history. By 1971, when Bangladesh achieved independence, foreigners saw the country as little more than a very poor place with even poorer prospects. A *Time* magazine article published on December 20, 1971, at the time of independence, noted that “the danger to [Bangladesh’s] economy lies mainly in the fact that it is heavily based on jute and burlap, and synthetic substitutes are gradually replacing both.” There was every reason to be pessimistic. With the end of the widespread violence that had plagued the country during most of 1971, including acts of genocide perpetrated by the Pakistani military, ten million refugees were now returning from India. They came home to partially destroyed highways, bridges, railroads, and ports; uncultivated fields; and, for the majority, the prospect of earning little more than \$100 per year, even in peacetime.

Given these circumstances, I have always wondered how Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of Bangladesh, could garner sufficient mental strength and imagination to envision building a prosperous country based on equity and fairness—what he called Golden Bengal. That mental strength must have been truly extraordinary, enabling Sheikh Mujib not only to push forward his agenda of reestablishing the Golden Bengal but also to endure many imprisonments, whose collective length amounted to more than

half the time during his years of struggle which lasted from 1947 to 1971. Having reflected on this question throughout my life, I began to think about writing this essay. I believe at least a partial reason for his drive lies in Sheikh Mujib's appreciation of Bengal's history. That knowledge of history gave him a firm footing for his innate abilities: extraordinary courage, a sense of justice and fairness, and empathy for others.

Sheikh Mujib was one Bengali who retained an appreciation for the historic role of Bengal. He could see people's self-esteem destroyed through expropriation and oppression, and he wanted to restore it. This was not just a matter of empathy. It had a practical side. He believed that, as a leader, if he restored people's self-esteem through equity and fairness, they would have the capacity to restore the country to its historic prosperity. After all, the original prosperity in Bengal was built by people's hard work and virtually nothing else, in an environment that was by no means ideal but was conducive enough to allow initiative to flourish. In my own small way, following Sheikh Mujib's lead, I share this often-ignored aspect of Bangladesh's history in the hope that it will let the younger generation see their country from a different perspective and help restore their self-esteem.

In 1939, two prominent leaders of the Indian independence movement, including Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, visited Gopalganj district and made a mark on a 19-year-old student named Sheikh Mujib. Suhrawardy, who later became the chief minister of Bengal and prime minister of Pakistan in the 1950s, took an interest in the young man, and Sheikh Mujib, in turn, found a mentor in him.

During the famine of 1943, Suhrawardy was the minister of civil supplies for Bengal. He quickly set up special food outlets and gruel kitchens and made other efforts to manage the crisis. At that

time, the 23-year-old Sheikh Mujib was a student at Calcutta Islamia College under Calcutta University. His response to the famine was to volunteer, day and night, distributing what limited assistance existed to the hungry. In his book *Unfinished Memoirs*, written during some of his 18 episodes of imprisonment, Sheikh Mujib recalled how the British had prioritized the wartime movement of arms and soldiers over the transport of food, which contributed to the famine:

The English had given priority to war efforts and for them the people of Bengal came second. As far as they were concerned, precedence would have to be given to the movement of arms. Trains would therefore first allot arms and ammunitions. Only the leftover space could be used for the movement of food grain. The English were locked in a battle and Bengalis would have to die of hunger as a consequence. And this the land that was once fabled for its resources! When the East India company annexed Bengal . . . [it] was so rich that a wealthy businessman from Murshidabad [almost certainly Jagath Seth, whose name was mentioned earlier in this essay] could buy the city of London. And now I saw what we were reduced to: mothers dying in the streets while their babies still suckled; dogs competing with people for leftovers in garbage dumps; children abandoned by their mothers who had run away or sold them, driven by hunger. At times, they failed to do even that since there would be no buyers . . . What were we to do? We distributed our hostel leftovers among the famished, but how far could that solve

such a massive problem? (Rahman 2019, 17-18)

Echoing the account of the 1943 famine by other authors, one can see that Sheikh Mujib was very aware of Bengal's past prosperity and thus its future potential—if that potential were allowed to blossom. Yet he also recognized the painfully limited effects of his own charitable efforts. Ironically, the 1943 crisis was a great teacher. It not only pointed out that people did not have food, it also clearly showed that they did not have rights and thus did not obtain justice. Bengal's history taught him that the country deserved better and the people deserved better. The country had clearly descended to a far enough low point, that the need to ascend back was just as clear. Fundamental change, and not just simple charity, was needed.

This experience and his exposure to Suhrawardy four years earlier, along with other factors, pushed him into politics even before he graduated from college in 1947. Among other roles, Sheikh Mujib was the general secretary of the student union of his college in 1946.

In *Unfinished Memoirs*, Sheikh Mujib also provides an account of his own birth and his family that mirrors the decline of the larger Bengal:

[The] Sheikh family was once well-established [, which] can be deduced from the fact that buildings made from small bricks dating from the Mughal era are part of the family heritage. There were four such buildings once . . . [One] of these buildings has collapsed and now houses poisonous snakes. Most members of our extended family no longer have the wherewithal to keep these buildings standing. Many of them now lived in tin-roof houses surrounding these crumbling buildings. I was

born in one of these houses . . . From family elders as well as the lyrics of songs sung by local bards, I managed to find out how the Sheikh family plummeted in status of great wealth to proprietors of ruins. (Rahman 2019, 2)

Thus, Sheikh Mujib's family history and that of the country must have combined in his mind. Both his family and the country had fallen into ruin over a period of 200 years. That history had a simple message: he, the country, and the people deserved much better. This, I believe, gave him his profound sense of self-worth and self-assuredness, which extended to his countrymen as a result of his naturally empathetic personality.

From 1947 on, Sheikh Mujib fought many political battles, the first being the right to have Bengali as a national language in Pakistan. The Pakistani government sought to impose Urdu—the language of a minority in West Pakistan—to be Pakistan's national language. Sheikh Mujib protested this and other policies that were discriminatory toward the people of East Pakistan. His natural ability to articulate people's concerns and aspirations became very evident, and people responded to his lead. The Language Movement, as it became known, was successfully led by Sheikh Mujib; the Pakistani regime withdrew the idea that Urdu would be the national language. People began to recognize his exceptional leadership qualities, and from then on he continually pressed for democratic rights and better economic opportunities for the people that included a proposal for a federated Pakistan in the 1960s that would give considerable autonomy to its eastern wing. Because of his persistent demand for these rights and opportunities, he spent 13 of the 24 years from 1947 to 1971 in prison. Eventually, in December 1970, under the supervision of the Pakistani

military regime, an election was held in all of Pakistan. Sheikh Mujib won the majority and was declared prime minister elect by the military strongman.

The general expectation at the time was that power would be handed over to Sheikh Mujib in early 1971. However, after repeatedly refusing to hand over power, on the evening March 25, 1971, the military regime started a systematic elimination and subjugation of Bengalis. Over the following nine months, an estimated one million lives were lost ("Bangladesh: Out of War" 1971).

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country on December 16, 1971. The following month, Sheikh Mujib was released from a Pakistani prison. He returned to Dhaka to a heartfelt hero's welcome.

## CONCLUSION

Sheikh Mujib believed in the people of Bangladesh and in the restoration of their rights and self-esteem. He believed that if the self-esteem of the people were restored by the country's leadership through justice and equity, the people themselves would restore the country to its historic prosperity. His vision and thinking became Bangladesh's foundation.

Although Sheikh Mujib was tragically killed in 1975, his vision lives on. His daughter, Sheikh Hasina, is the current Prime Minister. She has proven her own extraordinary leadership qualities while holding the helm for nearly 20 years, with some interruptions. She inherited her father's faith in the people and in creating an environment where their self-esteem is restored and their imagination, ingenuity, and industriousness unleashed. In the last 50 years, the GDP of the country has multiplied by nearly 50 times, from \$9 billion in 1971 to nearly \$450 billion by the end of 2022. Life expectancy in Bangladesh

today stands at 73 years (47 years in 1971), and the literacy rate among people aged 15-24 is at 95% (36% in 1981). By these and many other measures of economic and social progress, Bangladesh comes out ahead of Pakistan and India; back in 1971, Bangladesh lagged significantly behind these countries.

Over the past 300 years, the people of Bangladesh have learned through real sacrifices that material wealth can be lost, but the worst loss is of the self-esteem necessary to rebuild. Most sensible adults are careful that they do not hurt their children's self-esteem, which is an essential trait when trying to find one's solid place in the world. The same is true for a nation. In the case of a nation, one key element for its self-esteem is its history. Fortunately, Bangladeshis have an impressive history, and their founding father had strong faith in himself and in his people. Guided by an able leader, these strengths are enabling Bangladeshis to continue to lift themselves higher. As the nation celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> year, the rest of the world is beginning to notice.

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1. The terms "inside" and "outside" as used in this context are from the work of Sven Beckert, whom I quote later in this essay.
  2. While Marx may be discredited for certain incorrect observations on political economies, he was nonetheless an insightful student of economic history.
  3. Many books have similar descriptions of Bengal. See, for example, Robins (2012).
  4. As a reference point, the British government's annual budget at that time was about £10 million.
  5. The Tea Act taxed the North American colonists on the import and sale of tea, an important beverage at the time.
  6. Incidentally, this impeachment trial was taking place at the time James Madison was helping to write the US Constitution, in which he adopted the language "high crimes and misdemeanors" as grounds for impeachment of elected officials in the United States.