Conclusions

This history of the changing Bengali role in the nationalist movement has been illustrative of the general proposition that regional groups came into the movement at different times and at different rates. The Bengalis, especially high-caste Hindus, played a significant part in the movement during its first two generations. They contributed in numerous ways to the organization and ideology of the movement, and also helped to create a Bengali self-image of priority and preeminence among the regional groups comprising the Indian nation. This image was not far out of line in the period up to the end of World War I. Later, however, leaders from other regions, especially Mahatma Gandhi and his closest associates, took command of the movement.

From about 1920, Bengali sentiment and leadership was often out of step with the Gandhian cadence. This date also marks the period when national leaders from outside Bengal, particularly Gandhi, formed alliances with some Bengali leaders who became more closely tied to the national program and organization than to their own region. Thus at the very time when the Congress was being reorganized and becoming more truly a national organization, many Bengalis and their leaders were starting to become somewhat isolated from the mainstream of the movement. For example, although nonviolence became the official nationalist credo, revolutionaries and important leaders sympathetic to the use of violence, such as Subhas Bose, flourished in Bengal.

There are a number of lines of continuity between the ideological and organizational forms developed by Bengalis during the nationalist movement and long-standing religious and political traditions. Most high-caste Hindus in Bengal are Shaktas or have been heavily influ-
enced by Shaktism, since lines between sects in Bengal are relatively fluid. In the writings and speeches of many Bengali nationalist leaders there is a concern with strength and weakness. A conception of the energizing principle of the universe growing out of the Shakti tradition seems to have mingled with quite a different and Western idea, that of manliness and physical prowess. The British stereotype of the Bengalis as weak and effeminate spurred the latter’s cultural and political revival, which drew upon these very different traditions stressing energy and strength. Some Bengali leaders, including Aurobindo Ghose, M. N. Roy, Subhas Bose, and less famous revolutionaries, would have agreed that the Bengalis were strong and then, somehow, became weak. In order to regain the lost strength, power, and autonomy, they argued, explicitly or implicitly, that all means were permissible. This would fit in with their Shakta background, no matter how secular some of them became in later life, and with Bengali traditions of violence. They would have agreed with Nirad C. Chaudhuri that Gandhi’s was the “morality of the servus.” 2 Gandhi’s politics did not appeal to them except insofar as they were effective in launching a militant mass movement. It is true that others, like Rabindranath Tagore, were heavily influenced by Vaishnava as well as Shakti traditions. But Tagore, too, was concerned with the achievement of strength and vitality and with disproving the British view of the Bengali. Tagore also had much more understanding of the revolutionaries than had most non-Bengalis, including the Gandhians. Although he condemned the use of violence as yet another false shortcut to freedom, he saw that all Bengalis bore responsibility for the culture and politics which brought men to such actions.

Other cultural values that are salient to the division between many Hindu Bengalis and non-Bengali Gandhians has been the evaluation of Bengali culture and North Indian culture. Bengali spokesmen, including Tagore, Chaudhuri, and even a political man like Subhas Bose, have been proud of their language and literary achievements. To them Gandhi’s rejection of art and literature as well as science, reason, and modern civilization was to be deplored. The Bengalis saw themselves as the defenders both of a rich and living regional tradition and of the positive aspects of Western civilization. Many Bengalis believed that they were preventing what Nirad C. Chaudhuri has described as “a de-
scent towards the old rancorous and atavistic form of Indian nationalism.”

The flow of Shakta values and conceptions into the nationalist movement and the use of Hindu symbols and songs contributed to the partial alienation of Bengali Muslims. Only at a few junctures were important or large numbers of Muslims willing to join with the Bengali Hindu nationalists. Perhaps the most crucial setback to possible lasting cooperation was the death of C. R. Das, who alone seemed capable of gaining Muslim trust. The combination of religion and nationalism that helped to popularize the movement among Hindus at the same time contributed to the split with the Muslims.

Older Bengali elements can also be found in the ways in which Bengalis organized politically and in the paths by which men came to political leadership. A factional model, drawing on both modern social science and traditional Indian political patterns, was suggested in the description of Moderates and Extremists, revolutionary groups, and Gandhians versus non-Gandhians. Within political factions and perhaps in a much broader context as well, there were also several traditional models for the adherence of followers to a single leader, two important ones being the guru-shishya and raja-subordinate relationships. These patterns were at work, but combined with other elements in the modern context. For the first generation of leaders and even for later ones, high caste standing, accomplishment in Western learning, and professional status were held to be of considerable importance. Thus ascriptive and achievement criteria have been at work. Another element that helped some men to gain notoriety and political support was the sacrifice made for the movement. Thus C. R. Das gained prestige by giving up his law practice and aristocratic style of living. Subhas Bose’s standing as a leader was enhanced by his ill-health, fasting, and hardships in prison and exile.

Much attention has been given to the rise of political leaders in the successive nationalist generations and to an assessment of their effectiveness. Surendranath Banerjea, who dominated the Indian Association and the Bengali contingent of the Congress for several decades, built up a small organization and a corps of colleagues and subordinates, but he left the mofussil virtually untouched. He successfully fought off challenges to his dominance until 1918, but he did not attempt to con-
struct a mass electoral organization. The Extremists in Bengal made a serious attempt to gain control of the Congress and talked of building an organization with mass support in every district, but they failed to do so. They did succeed, however, in politicizing many Bengalis who later contributed to the movement. At the same time, Muslim notables, in reaction to the Swadeshi movement, began to enter politics, starting as the Hindus had by forming a small caucus party with no mass organization.

It was only with the Gandhian or third generation that much more systematic efforts were made to build a mass base. In Bengal, C. R. Das finally routed Surendranath Banerjea and his colleagues from their seats of power in the Bengal branch of the Congress. Heading the Non-cooperation Movement in Bengal and then leading a campaign for the Bengal Legislative Council in 1923, Das made the first transitional step from a small party of notables to a mass political organization which could turn out the vote, do relief and propaganda work, lead an effective hartal, and even serve as a base from which to challenge the national leadership and program of the Congress. Das was the most effective Bengali nationalist leader and the one leader whose ideas for action and organization did not completely outstrip his ability to carry them through. He made a pact with some Bengali Muslim leaders and had crucial Muslim support for the Swaraj Party. Unfortunately, Das died in 1925, and no other Bengali leader proved to have the organizing skill, the trust and sympathy of many sections of the community, and the wisdom in choice of subordinates that he had had.

In the period 1926 to 1940, Subhas Bose was the most popular Bengali Hindu leader, but he never gained sufficient support among Hindus or Muslims and never had an able cadre of subordinates which might have helped to bring him successes like those of Das. Bose became a leader of the leftists on the national scene and he, like Das, mounted a challenge to the Gandhian leadership. But Bose had some reservations about his challenge after he beat the Gandhian candidate in an election for Congress president. Bose did not have the wholehearted support of a number of peers in other regions, or the solid organizational backing such an effort required. In January 1937, the Statesman's political commentator could still maintain that the masses waited, unorganized, outside party politics. The Bengal Provincial
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Congress in the Bose years did not effectively bring the peasants and workers, still without much say in legislative politics, into the organization. Bose provided rhetoric about the masses, but not the necessary kind of leadership. The Congress remained a party of what Marxist analysts would call the bourgeoisie. It was composed of professional men, some liberal landholders, and businessmen who claimed to speak for all Bengalis. In the politics of the National Congress, Bose won a preliminary victory but then was badly beaten by the Gandhian leadership, who recaptured both the Congress presidency and, eventually, the Bengal Provincial Congress. Bose’s ideas and actions far exceeded his abilities to carry them out.

Leaders from all three nationalist generations had an image of the priority of Bengal, but by the Gandhian period such a regional self-image was out of touch with political realities. The difficulty of reforming this image so that it would be more realistic was one no Bengali political or cultural leader wanted to face. Some hoped that the decline and isolation of the Bengalis in the movement was simply a transitory state before new heights. But with the coming of independence, Bengali Hindus looked more to Bengali greatness in the past than to the new dawns ahead.

Bengal, East and West, is still in the midst of upheaval and political change. West Bengal has been torn by violence during the past few years as Marxist revolutionaries or Naxalites started a campaign of violence for which they themselves (as well as others) have had to pay dearly and which has not, to date, been successful. A Congress government is again in control, but social and political forces churn beneath the surface.

In the eastern part of Bengal, now Bangladesh, the Bengalis took the opportunity of the 1970 elections to express their grievances against their exploitation by the West Pakistanis during a generation of independence. Negotiations for a political solution failed and the military regime attempted to suppress the struggle for political, economic, and cultural justice. A movement for autonomy turned into a war for independence. The Indian army came to the aid of the Bangladesh irregulars and Bangladesh government established by members of the Awami League Party, and together they triumphed over the Pakistani army.
Conclusions

New nationhood has brought measures of hope and despair and the possibility for a new and healthier relationship between the two Bengals. But the poverty is so great and the cultural and social cleavages so strong that there cannot be any easy solutions. Although the people in the two Bengals speak Bengali, they still harbor communal antagonisms that not even a joint military victory can eradicate. In time these hostile feelings may wane or may become stronger. Only the growth of a spirit of communal harmony will allow a common sense of Bengali identity to flourish. The economic pressures are severe in both Bengals, and what effect this will have on the communal issue, no analyst can say with certainty. Bengal is again a cynosure of South Asian politics as its people struggle to determine their future.