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Abstract

This article argues that looking solely for the immediate causes of reproductive change may distort our understanding of policy options by failing to take into account the historical and cultural factors that affect not only the impact of policies and programs but the very existence and nature of these policies and programs. The article examines the historical origins and spread of “modern” ideas in Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal in India. It concludes that a colonial history in which education and modernization processes took hold very early among the elites in the larger Bengal region was paradoxically accompanied by a strong allegiance to the Bengali language. This strong sense of language identity has promoted secularism because language has competed with religious and other sectarian identities. It has also facilitated and reinforced the diffusion of modern ideas both within and between the two Bengali-speaking regions. Thus, to understand the fertility decline in Bangladesh, for example, one needs to look also at cultural boundaries. In this case, the cultural commonality through language facilitates the spread of new ideas across the two Bengals; and the political and religious separation between them increases the heterogeneity and newness of the ideas thus spread. In turn, the strong sense of language identity has facilitated mass mobilization more easily and intensely within the two Bengals. Through both these processes, Bangladesh and West Bengal today are more “modern” and more amenable to social change than many other parts of South Asia and the Middle East.

Declines in fertility in the contemporary world tend to be explained in contemporary terms. Immediate causes are sought and generally center around issues of changing demand and supply. More specifically, the proponents of the importance of changing demand stress the changing structural conditions that alter the costs and benefits of children, while the “supply-siders” give central importance to family planning programs which purportedly increase awareness and practice of contraception so that birth control becomes both desirable and possible.

In recent years, these explanations have become enriched by another class of explanations that focus on the spread of positive attitudes toward controlled fertility and to contraception. These attitudes may arise through means that are only tangentially related to changing economic environments or to government population policy. In particular, they may develop through a process of “diffusion” of ideas from individuals already positively inclined in this direction. Montgomery and Casterline (1998) provide a clear definition of such diffusion of attitudes in the context of social change: they refer to diffusion as “a process in which individuals’ decisions...are affected by the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of others with whom they come in contact” (p. 39). These “others” may be of different kinds—peer groups, elites, family, friends, and so on—and the contact may occur in a variety of ways. Montgomery and Casterline (1998) postulate three principal mechanisms for these “social effects”: social learning, social influence, and social norms.

Several kinds of evidence support the validity of these diffusion theories as partial explanations of fertility decline.¹ But most diffusion theories in demography have two features in common. First, they concentrate on the fact of diffusion itself, as an independent variable, amenable to independent manipulation and therefore a useful policy instrument. Second, they see diffusion as being concerned primarily with the spread of attitudes and beliefs regarding contraception and controlled fertility, with a consequent policy focus on family planning messages.

In this article, we expand the concept and the relevance of diffusion on both these fronts. On the first point, the independence of the diffusion variable, we suggest that diffusion does not take place in a vacuum: there are characteristics of both the “diffusers” and the “diffusees” (if one may coin these terms) that determine the nature, pace, and impact of the diffusion process. As Casterline (1999) writes, we are still far from understanding the conditions under which social effects prosper. Second, one needs a more general definition of what is being diffused, even to understand the role of diffu-

sion in fertility change. Our contention is that there is more to be learned from an understanding of the forces that promote the diffusion of a new ideology or worldview than from focusing on the ways in which specific attitudes to contraception are spread.

To illustrate these two propositions, we examine the experience of the geographic area we call Greater Bengal. This is the Bengali-speaking region encompassed by the country of Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal in India. The demographic transition of Bangladesh is of course one of the most intensely studied transitions of the contemporary world. Its fertility decline—both in terms of the onset and the pace—has seemed to defy standard explanations except in often convoluted ways, and there is an enormous literature trying to understand how fertility has fallen so rapidly in a country that meets few of the standard preconditions for fertility decline: significant socioeconomic progress; major falls in mortality; substantial changes in the status of women. Moreover, Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country, and the conventional understanding is that Islam is an extremely conservative religion with especially conservative views on matters of abortion and contraception. Given all this, it is not surprising that the literature has contained so much debate on whether the fertility decline is driven primarily by social change (e.g., Caldwell et al. 1999), the family planning program (e.g., Cleland et al. 1994), a rise in the status of women (e.g., Schuller and Hashemi 1994), coercion (e.g., Hartmann 1995), or a change in the nature and a possible intensification of poverty (e.g., Adnan 1998). But note that all these debates frame the argument in immediate cause-and-effect terms and have little interest in the historical processes that may have led to their operation. Indeed, as Greenhalgh (1995) complains, ahistorical approaches are a striking feature of analyses of reproductive change in the developing world, except in a very short-term sense.

West Bengal, on the other hand, has not excited the demographic imagination. It occupies an ambiguous geographical position in the popular north–south analytic dichotomy in studies of India, and it does not display the starkly extreme demographic regimes of, say, Uttar Pradesh and Kerala. West Bengal is nevertheless interesting demographically. Calcutta, the capital of the state, began its fertility decline much earlier than the rest of the country according to estimates by Mari Bhat (1996). Today, fertility levels in West Bengal are well below the national average for India (see Table 1), and its

Table 1 Trends in the total fertility rate

	Pakistan^a	India^a	Bangladesh^a	West Bengal^b
1975	6.3	4.9	6.3	N.A.
1980	6.2	4.5	6.2	4.2
1985	6.1	4.3	5.7	3.7
1989	5.7	3.9	5.1	3.3
1991	5.5	3.6	4.3	2.9
1993	5.4	3.5	3.4	3.0
1997	5.3	3.4	3.3	2.3

^aPiet-Pelon, Rob, and Khan 1999: 51.

^b1993: NFHS, First Round. 1997: NFHS, Second Round. Remaining years: various rounds of the Sample Registration Scheme for West Bengal.

levels of use of temporary methods of contraception, according to the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS), are the highest in the country (International Institute for Population Studies 1995a). These high levels of use of temporary methods are at least partly the result of unusually high levels of use of traditional methods of contraception. While one could argue that traditional methods do not represent very effective contraceptive use, a counter-argument could be made that they nevertheless indicate intentions to delay or space births. These intentions are also indicated by NFHS results which find that West Bengal has the highest level of contraceptive use among women with no living children (20 percent, as compared to 4 percent for all-India) and that, except for Delhi and Tripura, West Bengal has the lowest proportion of women for whom sterilization is the first method of contraception ever used.

In addition, while Muslims throughout India have lower levels of contraceptive use than Hindus, the Muslims of West Bengal have the highest level of contraceptive use (43 percent) in the country (the all-India average is 28 percent)—higher even than that of the Muslims of Kerala (38 percent). In other words, the Muslims of West Bengal are clearly different from their coreligionists in other parts of the country (on all this, see Ramesh, Gulati, and Retherford 1996).

The most interesting demographic feature of West Bengal is that these differences from all-India averages exist despite a state government that has been quite indif-

ferent to population policy: West Bengal has never had the kind of aggressive or even efficient family planning campaign or program that many other parts of the country have embraced at various times.

The low level of demographic interest notwithstanding, West Bengal has been of great interest to other social scientists—historians and political scientists in particular. In this article we rely on some of the resultant literature to support our contention that history and culture can combine to create an environment that is more conducive to social change in some situations than in others, a conduciveness that can lead to significant reproductive change even in the absence of changes in the standard demand and supply factors associated with reproductive control. The Bengali language is a crucial element in the spread of such conduciveness, and we suggest that a proper understanding of the fertility decline in Bangladesh therefore requires a joint study of both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Such a study would yield lessons on fertility change in West Bengal as well, but we do not have a sufficient record of the details of fertility change in West Bengal on which we can base these lessons. We thus use other markers of social change in West Bengal: its unique political situation (it is the only part of the world that has had an unbroken record of almost a quarter-century of *elected* Communist Party rule) and its remarkable success in fostering agrarian change in general and the adoption of agricultural innovations in particular. In our formulation, these social changes are analogous to the social change implied by fertility decline in Bangladesh. All these changes are in turn a concomitant of the diffusion of an ideology of openness to change and to innovative behavior that we posit as a precondition for fertility decline.

Our central message is that the two Bengals (Bangladesh and West Bengal) have, for a combination of historical, cultural, and political reasons, long had a willingness to change that often ran counter to their socioeconomic circumstances. This willingness to change began with the “elites” but spread to the general population for these same reasons. We hypothesize that this unique combination of historical, cultural, and political factors in Greater Bengal has resulted in a unique form of Bengali “modernism” and Bengali nationalism. In turn, this modernism has facilitated the transition to what may be called a “secular” society that is somewhat at odds with the general socioeconomic development of the region. As the literature on the European fertility transition illus-

trates, such a secular, “liberal” outlook can facilitate an openness to change and innovation when the opportunities for such change or innovation arise (e.g., Lesthaeghe and Wilson 1986). In other words, it is quite possible that the program and development factors that inform part of the debate on the determinants of fertility change in Bangladesh would not have succeeded equally well in another environment.

Indeed, one could also suggest that the very appearance of such factors on the Bengal scene is an outcome of the modernization just described. That is, policymakers as well as politicians have themselves been more receptive to the idea of radical programs. In this context an analogy may be drawn between the programs of the Communist Party that has ruled West Bengal and the programs of the government and the non-governmental organizations that dominate the scene in Bangladesh.

As for Bengali (that is, language) nationalism, it has helped to do two things. First, it has increased the interaction between the two Bengals, and, given the political and religious divide between the two regions, it has thus exposed each region to a wider world of ideas and behaviors than would have been possible had the language-based interaction been confined within political borders. Second, within each region, it has increased the interaction between the elites and the general population in a way that is less common in areas where socioeconomic differences are not attenuated by such a strong sense of cultural identity. It is therefore not surprising that governmental and nongovernmental programs have relied heavily on mass recruitment and have developed urban–rural links in a way that is less common in other parts of South Asia.

In the following sections, we elaborate on all these issues. We first justify our concentration on the elites of Bengali society. We then describe the rise of Bengali modernism and Bengali nationalism among the elites in the two Bengals up to as well as after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent. The discussion relates the rise of a Westernized, but nevertheless nationalistic middle class in Bengal to the early and intense experience of colonialism combined with some elements of its own past. We then consider some of the ways in which the strong sense of Bengali identity in the two Bengals has facilitated a continuous interaction between the elites of the two regions, so that they have strengthened and expanded the secular, liberal discourse within each region. We also examine some of the ways in which a strong language identity has fostered the

diffusion of ideas between the elites and the larger population within each region. That is, we look at some of the implications of Bengali modernism and Bengali nationalism for the inclination and the ability of the elites to spread these new ideologies across socioeconomic boundaries within the two regions.² This permeability must be a part of the explanation for the highly successful spread of two kinds of innovations—agrarian change in West Bengal and contraceptive use in Bangladesh—that have attracted much academic attention in recent years. Finally, we speculate on some of the larger implications of our findings.

THE ELITES AND REPRODUCTIVE CHANGE

In this article we look at the special position historically of the elites of the two Bengals.³ The theoretical justification for this focus comes from the diffusion literature in sociology. In particular, we draw upon the part of this literature that discusses the notion of the most effective agents of social change. The reference here is to the diffusion of a new way of thinking, a new ideology, and not to allaying fears about new forms of behavior and the adoption of physical innovations (such as the adoption of new agricultural technology) in particular. The general conclusion from this discussion seems to be that in the latter case, the experience of those who face similar environments of risk has much to offer. But in introducing one to and legitimizing a new worldview, accepted figures of authority have more influence than friends and neighbors (on this, see also Granovetter 1973; Liu and Duff 1972; Basu and Sundar 1988).

But the strength of these accepted figures of authority depends in turn on two factors: their own openness and commitment to change and innovations and their ability to transmit these attributes of themselves to the general population. Continuing to draw on the diffusion literature, one may presume that the modernization of the elites depends on the heterogeneity of the world of ideas and experiences that they are exposed to. We contend that such heterogeneous exposure is facilitated by two things in Bengal: an early history of exposure to the larger world and the strong sense of language identity that links the elites on both sides of the political border and thus opens up to them a larger world of thought, policy, and programs than if their sources of such information had been limited to their own countrymen. In turn, this pervasive sense of language

identity makes it easier for them to transmit these new modes of thought to the general population than is the case in populations in which the gulf between elites and “masses” is unbridgeably dominated by the socioeconomic differences between the two groups. In our case, the language identity is able to overcome these other differences to some extent and therefore facilitate the mass mobilization that heralds mass social change.

In the specific study of reproductive change, the focus on the elites is also empirically justified. First, it seems to be justified by the literature on historical as well as contemporary fertility transitions that suggests that the most-advantaged socioeconomic groups in a region are usually the first to adopt controlled fertility; they are what Livi-Bacci (1986) calls the “forerunners of fertility decline.” Indeed, the demographic literature goes as far as to say that it is often this change in behavior among the elites that diffuses into the general population through what Cleland and Wilson (1987) call “social imitation.”

We contend that the elites of Bengal are and were a privileged group in this respect. Their potential for facilitating the spread of fertility decline through their own behavior in this area seems to have been greater than for comparable groups elsewhere. To begin with, it is striking that as early as the 1970s the city of Calcutta (which may be treated as the geographical elite of the greater Bengal region) had the lowest fertility in India. According to the estimates of Mari Bhat (1996), in 1974–80 the total fertility rate in Calcutta was 2.0, lower even than in Trivandrum (with a TFR of 2.5 at this time), the capital of the current demographic forerunner, Kerala.

It would of course have been helpful to have these data broken down by some indicator of social class, since it is the elites of greater Bengal that are of concern here. The scattered evidence on this subject supports the assumption that the decline in elite fertility in Bengal began earlier and continues to be sharper than in other parts of India. A survey in three socioeconomically distinct parts of the city of Calcutta in 1947–49 found that, in the locality in which the population was largely upper-class and educated, as many as 38 percent of married women reported having used some form of birth control, this figure being as high as 18 percent even for women aged 40–44 at the time of the survey. That is, in this part of the city, significant levels of contraceptive use seem to have existed as far back as the 1930s and 1940s (Chandrasekaran and George 1962).

More contemporary data, from the National Family Health Survey for example, suggest strongly that the elites (broadly measured here as women who have completed at least a high school education⁴) of West Bengal today are more modern in their fertility behavior than the elites of the rest of India, including Kerala (although fertility levels in Kerala vary less by class). Table 2 lays out some statewise differentials in elite fertility in India; it is clear that this group in West Bengal leads the rest of the country, a lead that we suggest has historical roots.

Even if one does not subscribe to diffusion theories of reproductive change, the attitudes and values of the elites remain a focus of interest because these groups carry the greatest potential for social change in general and fertility change in particular. This

Table 2 Statewise differentials in elite fertility in India

State	TFR for currently married women with a high school or higher education ^a	Percent of current users of contraception among women with a high school or higher education ^b
All-India	2.15	55
West Bengal	1.50	73
Kerala	1.95	63
Andhra Pradesh	1.84	52
Karnataka	2.00	57
Tamil Nadu	2.04	52
Maharashtra	2.08	45
Bihar	2.58	46
Punjab	2.23	62
Madhya Pradesh	2.47	50
Rajasthan	2.32	47
Uttar Pradesh	2.55	40
Orissa	1.63	49

^aVarious volumes of International Institute for Population Studies, *National Family Health Survey 1992–93*, Bombay: IIPS, 1995.

^bRamesh, Gulati, and Retherford 1996.

potential derives from their ability to mold popular opinions and attitudes, including some of the rising material aspirations that may contribute to falling fertility (e.g., Casterline 1999; Sathar and Casterline 1998), and to legitimize new forms of behavior (including contraceptive practice). It also derives from their control of the policies and programs that can be catalysts of change in poor societies. In other words, even a change in the structural circumstances of people—in the fertility context, a change in the determinants of demand—requires some form of policy, even if the policy is one of nonintervention.

In particular, a society's elites are implicated in the growing literature on the role of "governance" in fertility declines (e.g., McNicoll 1997). While it is commonplace to discuss the role of family planning programs or other policies in reproductive change, this is not the same thing as exploring the macrolevel political economy of reproductive change.⁵ A political economy perspective would need to endogenize government, would need to try (as discussed by Dixit 1996; Basu 2000) to understand the constraints and influences on the formulators and implementers of policy. What we do here therefore is to place the elites of a society in their historical and cultural context, so that their actions themselves are as much to be explained as the impact of their actions.⁶

Barkat-e-Khuda et al. (1996) take one step toward endogenizing the elites of Bangladesh. They locate these elites (composed mainly of senior bureaucrats, in their analysis) in the larger postcolonial culture that was heavily informed by Malthusian arguments and by arguments for political intervention in public affairs. But they do not carry their endogenizing far enough. In particular, they do not grapple with elite differentials *within* South Asia. Given the common colonial history of the region and common (and, subsequent to 1971, similar) structures of elite training and formation in East and West Pakistan, one needs to explain how the elites of Bangladesh have turned out to be so much better able to foster social change. By focusing on neo-Malthusianism, these authors also do not depict the elites of Bangladesh as agents of social change in general, concentrating rather on more narrowly defined population policies and family planning programs—factors that in our framework are but manifestations of a greater propensity to overall social change. We turn now to the history of the Bengali-speaking world of which Bangladesh is a part.

HISTORY, CULTURE, AND THE GROWTH OF ELITE MODERNISM IN THE TWO BENGALS

First we specify what we mean by Bengali modernism. While modernism is often used as a synonym for Westernization,⁷ that use still begs the question of what one means by Westernization. The term may refer to purely structural processes, such as changes in modes of production, or to larger changes in worldviews and attitudes. On the latter, one may in turn think of Westernization as an adoption of Western forms of behavior and preferences. For example, in many parts of the developing world, Westernization has included (some would say, consisted solely of) the wholesale adoption of popular Western (or, increasingly, North American) culture. At a more abstruse level of imitation, Westernization would include an appreciation of and excellence in Western forms of civilization, in art or classical music for instance. This form of imitation is most evident in countries of the Far East and in some parts of the Middle East.

Alternatively, one may see Westernization as the adoption of Western modes of thought without reference to the ultimate preferences and behaviors in which these thought processes result. The Bengal experience suggests a form of Westernization that need not go hand in hand with the obvious adoption of Western modes of behavior. Instead, it involves the adoption of a secular philosophy that defines an *approach* to thought and behavior rather than the thought or behavior itself. In the present context, this “secularism” is manifested in two ways: in a separation of the religious and the political spheres of life, and in a willingness to question the old ways and to experiment with new forms of behavior even if these new modes are often changed versions of the old rather than imports originating from and developed in the West.

It is this willingness to question, to debate things that have long been taken for granted, that probably defines the essence of modernism in our context. This willingness can come through formal education, but it can also arise from other shocks to the system—wars, for example.⁸ The moral acceptance of the idea of specific forms of contraception or even of fertility control in general is, in this formulation, but one manifestation of the willingness to consider alternatives. As Lesthaeghe (1983) discusses with reference to the European experience, this kind of moral acceptability that accompanied the processes of secularization must have been an important determinant of differentials

in the pace of fertility decline that could not be explained solely by changing structural factors. Secularization helped to bring the idea of fertility control, in the familiar words of Coale (1973), “within the calculus of conscious choice.”⁹ As discussed below, it is this kind of secularization that took hold as Bengal modernized and that continues today in an allegiance to free thought and ideological radicalism that at times seems curiously misplaced.

A combination of circumstances, including the historical accident of being the first major outpost of the British Empire of undivided India, led to a unique brand of “nationalist modernization” in Bengal, a modernization that sought to combine traditional forms of learning and culture with modern perspectives gleaned from Western styles of education and politicization of the elites. The result was what has been called the Bengal renaissance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading to the somewhat exaggerated statement by the social reformer Gopal Krishna Gokhale that “what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India thinks tomorrow.”

Calcutta, the current capital of the Indian state of West Bengal, was the first administrative as well as economic capital of colonial India—serving as the administrative capital of the East India Company from 1757 to 1858 and then of the Indian part of the British Empire from 1858 to 1911.¹⁰ Thus, it is not surprising that it was also the first site for the spread of modern knowledge and the spread of an ideology of modernization. This spread is best appreciated by mention of the growth of education and of the print media in Bengal in the nineteenth century.¹¹

To summarize briefly, modern education made its first appearance on the Indian subcontinent in Bengal; its subsequent growth, too, was faster in this part of the region. For example, in 1901–02, there were 44 colleges (government and private) in Bengal, compared with 40 in Madras, 26 in the United Provinces, and 10 in Bombay. By 1918, Calcutta University, with 27,000 students, was the largest university in the world.

While much of this new education was elitist, restricted to the arts and humanities and concerned with producing junior government officials to run the day-to-day business of the colonial government,¹² it did have the less clearly anticipated effect of producing a class of thinkers who used their education to do more than in turn teach the next generation of civil servants or serve the government themselves.

Bengal's educated elites were also distinct in not being almost exclusively Brahmin by caste. Indeed, they were not even exclusively upper caste (see Wolpert 1994; Spear 1990; Marshall 1987)—a factor that must have contributed to their greater enthusiasm for the new ideas that modern education encouraged. In Madras, on the other hand, higher education was open almost exclusively to the Brahmin or otherwise conservative elites, their conservatism in fact being strengthened by perceived threats to their supremacy by a more egalitarian system of education. (For a description of some of the volatile debates on this subject in Madras Presidency, see Frykenberg 1986.) In Bombay Presidency similarly, the Marathi-speaking beneficiaries of the new higher education were almost exclusively Brahmin; the non-Marathi-speaking beneficiaries belonged almost entirely to an urban commercial middle class; and all groups came from backgrounds that were neither economically powerful nor rurally influential (Gumperz 1974).¹³

The lessons learned under this new form of modern education in Bengal were of course subversively used to encourage an anticolonial stance;¹⁴ but this education also provided the impetus for the development of an intellectual tradition that was conscious of the need for change in and reform of many aspects of Bengali life. What was usually called for was a reappraisal of Bengal's own past to attune it more to indigenous realities, and not necessarily a rejection of this past.¹⁵

The growth of this tradition is best embodied in the formation of several literary and learned societies (see Sanyal 1980 for a compendium of the large number of such groups in the nineteenth century) such as the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, founded in 1838, and the Bengal Social Science Association, established in 1867, as well as the formation and high visibility of more radical groups such as the Young Bengal organization and the much more sustained and influential Brahmo Samaj. All these organizations and associations and key individuals actively discussed and debated many of the sacrosanct traditions of India. Questions related to women, caste, education, and work all became legitimate issues of inquiry and redefinition. While this debate did not often lead to action or led to modest action at best, it did legitimize the concept of debate and dissent, and it served to move many of these questions from the domestic to the public domain (T. Sarkar 1997).

The rapid growth of the print media also contributed to the general air of dissent, questioning, and introspection of this period. According to *The Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Works*, produced by the Irish missionary James Long (cited in Roy 1995), at least 1,400 Bengali books and pamphlets had been printed during the first 50 years of the nineteenth century. While many of these books were mythological or fictional (the latter too frequently of an “amatory” nature according to the local authorities), there was an increasing presence (especially after 1850) of biographies, translations of English classics, and scientific discourses (Roy 1995). To give just two examples relevant to the present study, in 1878 Anandachandra Mitra published an *Introduction to the Science of Politics*, which grappled with many of the problems of governance that enter the current literature on the role of governance and civil society in demographic change (Chatterjee 1995). And in 1912 Satishchandra Chakraborty’s *Character Formation of Children* deeply influenced the debate on the changing nature of the family, the correct upbringing of the model child, and the central role of the mother in this endeavor (Bose 1995).

To the demographer, it may appear odd that most of these debates in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth related to matters of social and personal reform, with much less interest in larger economic forces as they impinged on society.¹⁶ Thus there was, for example, little public interest in the winds of Malthusianism that were beginning to sweep across Europe as well as, more slowly, across the Indian subcontinent. But this did not mean that population-related matters were not part of the intellectual and moral agenda of the elites. In fact, there was much public discussion on the new roles of women and the place of childbearing in these new roles. There is one salient caveat, however. The new roles envisioned for women did not include independence from men; instead the intent was to educate and develop a new breed of wives and mothers who were better companions to their husbands and better mothers to a new generation of disciplined and healthy children. Both these abilities were naturally hampered by untrammelled childbearing, and there was much attempt, especially in the rapidly multiplying women’s magazines and medical and marriage manuals, to teach women how to control their fertility.

It is of incidental interest that most of this birth control information was wrong. For example, the most fertile period was routinely described as stretching from a few

days before to a few days after (as well as including the duration of) the menstrual period. Intercourse was thus to be avoided during this time if a pregnancy was to be prevented (Borthwick 1984). What is significant, though, is that most of the reproductive advice was related to means of preventing rather than establishing a pregnancy; that is, this advice was addressing the contraceptive needs of women. Prolonged breastfeeding was also commonly promoted as an effective contraceptive, independently of its value for the child. Additionally, there was a burgeoning of information on abortion, addressed not only to women socially proscribed from childbearing (such as prostitutes and widows), but also to married women. Guha (1996), for example, discusses a collection of folk remedies to induce abortion that was set to verse and easily available to married women.

That abortion itself was frequently attempted was recorded by several medical practitioners from as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, the classic work on medical jurisprudence (N. Chevers, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence for Bengal and the North-Western Provinces*, Calcutta, 1856; cited in Guha 1996), which was intended to “contribute to the HISTORY OF CRIME IN INDIA,” referred to the “procurement of abortions” as among the “leading villainies of Bengalees...these ingenious, calm-tempered, indolently pertinacious sensualists.” And from her massive survey of maternal mortality in Calcutta in 1936, Dr. Margaret I. Neal-Edwards reported that abortion was very common in Bengal “among all classes, communities and ages of women, married and single” (cited in Guha 1996). Indeed by this time, abortion in Calcutta was publicly enough available for women to come seeking it from as far away as Delhi (interview with Roy Edward King Nissen, born 1905, in the series *Memories of the British in India*, Oral Archives at the India Office, London, cited in Guha 1996).

However, it should be added, it was the *Hindu* intelligentsia of Bengal that dominated the beginning of this growth in modern education and discourse.¹⁷ For example, in 1901 Hindus made up 94 percent of all students in liberal arts colleges, 96 percent in professional colleges, and 88 percent in high schools (Murshid 1995). Among Muslims, the Bengal elites were much less likely to owe allegiance to Bengal or to Bengali, and any social and political discourses they engaged in were more likely to be conducted in Persian or Urdu. (For a detailed discussion of religious differences in trends in and

attitudes toward education, see Ahmed 1996.) But once the Muslim intelligentsia began to view an English-language education more favorably, a class of Bengali Muslim intellectuals soon developed that was committed to fostering social change in their community.¹⁸

Moreover, while the Muslim Bengali intelligentsia was slower to grow than its Hindu counterpart, it is also true that Bengali Muslim culture and society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were and are very different from the societies and cultures of other Islamic regions. Ideas derived from Islamic history and thought were tempered by the local Bengali milieu and by the strong Sufi underpinnings of Islam in Bengal (e.g., Haq 1975; Akter Banu 1992; Ahmed 1996; Roy 1983). As Murshid (1995) discusses in some detail, this fact led to a persistent tension between the religious and secular perceptions of the Muslim intelligentsia in colonial Bengal. For example, the “Faith Movement” of the traditionalists of the 1920s was counterbalanced by the “Movement for the Emancipation of the Intellect,” which argued vociferously for the exercise of personal freedom and the right to choose between the acceptable and the unacceptable faces of Islam. At least partly, this “secular” temperament was an outcome of or ran parallel to similar trends in Bengali Hindu secularism, the leaders in the two groups having ties with one another (Murshid 1995).

This intellectual tradition continued after the partition of India in 1947, with a massive growth in the education and modernization of a new Bengali Muslim elite, drawn largely from the educated, upwardly mobile middle-*ashraf* (aristocracy). The teachers and students of Dhaka University were important agents of change in this regard and came to embody the search for a secular Bengali identity that reexamined many of the supposedly Islamic (and hence by extrapolation non-Bengali) underpinnings of undivided Pakistan. For example, the journal *New Values*, founded in 1949 by Sarwar Murshid, a teacher in the English department of the university, aimed to “direct a searching inquiry into the roots of our beliefs and attitudes and help remove some of the obstacles to intelligent action as a means to good life” (vol. 1, no. 1, 1949). The journal encouraged debate on all matters, with its own leaning being in the direction of a rational and secular society: “A secular attitude to cultural values will, in our context, keep culture from egocentricity and exclusion and make it absorptive of outside influ-

ences” (editorial in vol. 2, no. 1, 1950). In the context of religion, it emphasized an adherence to the spirit of Islam rather than to the letter of Islamic law.

Several other, individually small pieces of information create a picture of growing (though fluctuating) secularism and modernization among the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, a picture at odds with the more conservative Islam of Pakistan and the Middle East, for example. Much of this had historical roots of course. Quite apart from the impact of education and general modernization was the fact that West Pakistan was dominated by the *ashraf* ideology, which accorded high status to ethnic descent and to more conservative values. The East Pakistan intelligentsia, on the other hand, was largely sprung from the ranks: it had strong rural roots and thus was more sympathetic to the syncretic culture of rural Bengal than to the purely Muslim culture of the *ashraf*.

It is particularly significant that while political regimes in Bangladesh have played the Muslim card for political purposes, they have on the whole been half-hearted about the Islamization of the country. For example, while the secularism “pillar” was removed from the 1972 constitution (to be replaced with “in the name of Allah, the merciful and the beneficent”¹⁹) and Islam is now officially the state religion, the state has thus far stopped short of declaring Bangladesh to be an Islamic country. And even the declaration of Islam as the state religion does not seem to have prevented any of the political parties in power from actively promoting various “modern” programs for social change—in girls’ education, women’s employment, and family planning, to name only some. In any case, it appears that these constitutional changes were never derived from public demand; they were instead an attempt to legitimize their own standing by individual leaders like Ziaur Rahman (Akter Banu 1992).

Indeed, all accounts indicate that the local population in Bangladesh continues to practice a kind of “religious secularism,” in that individual religiosity coexists with a non-communalism (called *dharma-nirapeksata* in Bengali and loosely translated as “neutrality in religion”: see Siddique 1999; Akter Banu 1992) in interpersonal relations. This neutrality is also seen in the large proportions of individuals who believe that individual religiosity is compatible with a secular political system (see, e.g., the survey results in Akter Banu 1992) and in the fact that the religious organization with the largest public

following is not a political party such as Jamaat-I-Islami but an apolitical one such as Tabligbad, which emphasizes personal but not public allegiance to Islam (Sikand 1999).

The quantitative information that exists on this subject yields more interesting information. In an extensive rural and urban survey of religious attitudes, Akter Banu (1992) found that the large majority of respondents felt that the satisfaction they got from work was related to the physical needs it could satisfy and to the sense of personal achievement it conferred rather than to its being a religious obligation. Similarly, while seeking advice or help on day-to-day matters, both rural and urban Bangladeshis were much more likely to report going to peers or kin or to community leaders rather than to the local mullahs. And finally, the large majority were in favor of political leaders who were personally religious but secular in their political ideology.

THE GROWTH OF A BENGALI LANGUAGE IDENTITY

The colonial history of undivided Bengal is an important part of any attempt to understand Bengali modernism and Bengali nationalism, both of which survived the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 and the subsequent formation of the state of Bangladesh in 1971. In this section we summarize this history and its implications for language nationalism.

The distinguishing feature of Bengali language identity is that it is the primary form of identity of speakers of the language, usually superseding other forms of group allegiance.²⁰ This distinction is important, for while a common language may increase the ease of communication between two groups, this ease may not necessarily translate into greater discourse if other, non-language-related barriers to communication—such as religion or nationality—dominate. Here the Bengal situation is different because it is not just a common language we are talking about. A strong sense of language identity distinguishes the Bengali-speaking populations of the world, an identity that at most normal times transcends a national identity or even a religious identity. Thus the Bengali in West Bengal is often seen by his compatriots in other parts of the country as being a Bengali first and an Indian next,²¹ while the Bangladeshi citizen has traditionally caused concern in the larger Muslim world for seeing himself as a Bengali first and a Muslim next.

How and when did this strong sense of language identity emerge? Historically, one needs to look at this question in two parts. The first part is the development of Bengali identity in the undivided Bengal of colonial times; the second is the emergence of Bengali nationalism in East Pakistan that culminated in the creation and consequent sustenance of Bangladesh.

Language identity in greater Bengal and later West Bengal

Although the Bengali language itself has a long history (see Sen 1960), a conscious Bengali identity seems to have developed in the region only during colonialism and, many historians suggest, as a response to the colonial experience. We may identify two strands of influence in the literature. Both influences are more powerful in their effect in Bengal than in other parts of India because Calcutta was the seat of colonial power up to 1911, at which time the administrative and political capital shifted to Delhi.

First, the development of a self-identity was an inevitable result of the Western-style education that the *bhadralok*²² in Bengal took to so naturally. While this education led to the kind of modernization of attitudes and values discussed in the last section, it also soon led to the adoption of political ideas of self-government and freedom from foreign rule that this liberal education emphasized.

Second, notions of self-identity and self-pride were developed as a direct reaction to the colonial representation of their subjects as uncivilized (that is, needing to be ruled), weak, effete, and deceitful. (All of these adjectives were used by colonial authorities at one time or another to define the Bengali in particular and the Indian subject in general; an enormous literature on this subject and references to this literature can be found in, e.g., Moorhouse 1971; Chowdhury 1998; Sinha 1995; Chatterji 1994; S. Sarkar 1973; Metcalf 1994.) This representation naturally led not only to an opposition to the ruling state but also to a reexamination and redefinition of the self.

While these anticolonial attempts to define a new self focused broadly on a nationalism that was framed in terms of Indianness (and, frequently, Hinduness; see, e.g., Chowdhury 1998; Chatterji 1994), at a more local and immediate level it was expressed as a resurgence of Bengali identity. The Bengali language was of course the primary

marker of such an identity, and allegiance to the Bengali language was emphasized in early attempts to mobilize anti-British sentiments.²³ Bengali nationalism and (perhaps more importantly) the advent of printing also led to such a phenomenal growth in publishing in Bengali (as discussed above) that it became progressively easier to emphasize the Bengali identity.

This invigorated identity was strong enough to continue to exist as a separate entity after independence; it derived continuing strength from, and in turn led to the intellectual and cultural development of the Bengali region, or, more accurately, Calcutta. This intellectual and cultural growth began with a thriving economy but was not fazed by the subsequently slow economic progress made by the region. As Moorhouse (1971) describes it, “there are far more poets in this city [Calcutta] than there are novelists in Dublin” (p. 190), and “more publishers in Calcutta, it is said, than in all the rest of India” (p. 191).

This is of course a highly stylized picture. It is also a picture that in recent times (and similar to the situation described for contemporary Bangladesh below) is threatened and, more importantly, *perceived* to be seriously threatened, by global, national, and local “non-Bengali” forces that prevent the nurturing of the Bengali language in West Bengal. The very recent attempts to redress this perceived neglect by such symbolic gestures as changing the names of Calcutta and West Bengal to more Bengali versions, as well as more substantive measures such as the establishment of a language committee to strengthen the role of Bengali in education and culture, can, however, also be read as indicators of the continuing importance and strength of the Bengali identity. This is different from the sons-of-the-soil movements that fight for local rights in other parts of India: here language supremacy is at stake, rather than economic or administrative rights for the locals.

Language identity in Bangladesh

The birth of Bangladesh was itself an outcome of a growing Bengali or “Bangla” identity, distinct from the larger Muslim identity that pitched East Bengal into Pakistan in the 1947 division of the Indian subcontinent. The force of the language identity is best exemplified by the Language Movement, which began soon after 1947 to resist the

imposition of Urdu as the official language of the erstwhile Pakistan.²⁴ The Language Movement became indelibly imprinted in the Bangladeshi mass consciousness after the violence of 21 February 1952 (21 February being celebrated ever since as Language Martyrs' Day)²⁵ and eventually led to the establishment of Bengali as the official language of independent Bangladesh not just in conducting the affairs of government but also as the medium of instruction in education and the vehicle of development of a Bangladeshi culture. Indeed, this assertion of a Bengali identity facilitated the aforementioned development of secularism among the Bangladeshi intelligentsia.

That Bangladeshi culture is more Bengali than Islamic is evident in the many symbols of Bengaliness that have their origins in Hinduism rather than in Islam, but are seen today as being neither Hindu nor Muslim, merely Bengali (on this "syncretic" Islam of Bangladesh, see Roy 1983; Gardner 1998). The emphasis in matters of names, dress, music, the arts, and literature is often on Bengali rather than Muslim roots, although there has always been a small and recently growing movement that seeks to reemphasize the Islamic element of Bangladeshi culture.

LANGUAGE IDENTITY AND THE DIFFUSION OF MODERNIZATION

This article gives importance to language identity as an encourager of communication and to a common language as a facilitator of communication. We discuss two aspects of this encouraging and facilitating role of language.

The first is that language, as a primary marker of self-identification, can encourage links between groups that are otherwise disparate. We hypothesize that the larger and more diverse the network with which a language is shared, the greater its potential to facilitate changes in norms and behavior. On this count, the Bengali language is somewhat distinct: it is shared by groups that do not share political or religious boundaries, and it is associated in the minds of its speakers with a sense of identity that tends to overwhelm other forms of group identity. As we discuss below, this has led to a continuous intellectual and sociocultural interaction between West Bengal and Bangladesh at several levels, direct and indirect. This interaction may have overcome some of the conventional barriers to fertility decline because it has led to a greater exposure to new

ideas and a greater openness to change in the two regions. All this has been helped by historical factors that gave the Bengal region a head start in modern education and in intellectual discourses that informed the worldviews of the ruling elites. These worldviews are now being pressed into service to enable more rapid social change than has occurred in those parts of South Asia with a shorter history of intellectual and cultural exposure to the wider world.

Second, the Bengali identity has greatly facilitated a diffusion of new ideas and attitudes from the elites to the general population within each region. There is of course a third category of diffusion that is facilitated and encouraged by a common language and a strong language identity. This is the direct diffusion of ideas and knowledge between the general populations of West Bengal and Bangladesh, not mediated through the elites. (This kind of diffusion is the subject of a spatial analysis in Amin, Basu, and Stephenson 2000.)

Diffusion across political boundaries

One of the two central hypotheses of this article is that the elites' own attitudes toward change in Bengal have been reinforced by the strong sense of Bengali identity that links them across political borders and thus increases the heterogeneity of their networks of interaction. There is much empirical evidence (albeit all qualitative) for this sustained and intense interaction between the elites of the two Bengals.

Historically, of course, large-scale movements of the Bengali elites took place across political borders during and soon after the creation of Pakistan and then Bangladesh. On both sides they came with novel ideas and new attitudes, and it seems to be acknowledged that these cross-border movements brought with them a breath of fresh air. This migration-induced exposure to the winds of change has been considered particularly relevant for women's position in the two Bengals. For example, the writer and poet Nabaneeta Dev Sen has described great benefits for women's autonomy and attitudes in West Bengal of having educated Hindu women from East Bengal move there after 1947. Having left their security and possessions behind, these East Bengal women were perforce more bold and liberated than their native counterparts and provided many role models for educated West Bengal women to emulate. On the other side, many of the

Muslim women who moved from West Bengal to East Bengal came with what one interview respondent in Bangladesh called their “Calcutta education” and “Calcutta progressiveness,” which they soon put to use to spread social change for women in East Pakistan.²⁶

Today, at a political level, this cross-border interaction tends to fluctuate in intensity and warmth; there is often hostility to and suspicion of one another’s motives. But at intellectual, cultural, and emotional levels, the two Bengals continue to share a long history of generally positive interactions. This is reflected in a constant coming and going of individuals between the two regions, a disproportionate amount of space being given to one another in newspapers and magazines, and a frequent collaboration in the production of art and culture.²⁷

The binding force of “Bengaliness” is particularly evident in the diasporic populations of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Most parts of the world that have a significant resident South Asian population boast of at least one Bengali Association, membership in which hinges not on nationality or religion but on speaking Bengali and on sharing a common culture and sensibility.²⁸

A review of the foremost Bengali literary and intellectual magazine, *Desh*, confirms this continuing interaction. The magazine is published from Calcutta, but in several ways it is more of a Bengali magazine, avidly read and contributed to by the elites on both sides of the Bengal border. And quite apart from the literary interaction is the strong literary nostalgia: a large body of fiction and nonfiction in which political boundaries are blurred and commonalities almost romanticized. (The most prominent recent novel in English on this theme of artificial boundaries between the two Bengals is Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*.)

An important connecting role in this process of cross-national interaction must be assigned to the influence of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore on the language, literature, and culture of Bengali society. Few individuals anywhere have left such a lasting legacy in so many areas of life. In particular, Tagore had definite views on what constitutes the “modern” life and the relevance of Western notions of the state and society, views that continue to inform the debates on modernization in the two Bengals and that formed the opinions of the leaders for a large part of the twentieth century. The

Muslim poet and thinker Kazi Nazrul is also noteworthy in this respect. His pronouncements on religion, women, and related matters were far ahead of his time (see, e.g., Amin 1997), and his popularity as a poet helped greatly in the elites' acceptance of his views on these matters as well.

But these individuals are even more important for the way they are claimed by both Bengals. They are not seen as Hindu or Muslim, Indian or Bangladeshi; instead they are seen as Bengalis on whom Bengalis on both sides of the border feel they have a legitimate claim. This double claiming of influential Bengali figures has been highlighted recently in the adulation received in both West Bengal and Bangladesh by Amartya Sen, the Nobel laureate in economics for 1998. Sen himself has been quick to acknowledge his intellectual and emotional ties to both Bengals, going so far as to establish an educational foundation that will fund projects in both India and Bangladesh.

Diffusion within political boundaries

By diffusion we refer here to what Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoeft (1998) call "social permeability": the degree to which the ideas and behaviors of higher socioeconomic groups are able to spread to the general population. Studies from other parts of the world and of other times also demonstrate the role of strong networks between the elites and the masses and in particular between urban elites and the rural population in fostering modernization and social change, and, especially, fostering a faster pace of such change, whether in fertility decline or in some other factor. Rozman (1990), for example, contends that compared to China, Japanese society in the nineteenth century was particularly well poised for modernization because of the constant circulation of its elites from the provincial towns to the capital.

Both West Bengal and Bangladesh have long had the potential for unusually strong interactions between the elites and the general population. In particular, there has been much scope for interaction between the urban elites and the rural population, an interaction that could be exploited to disseminate information, attitudes, and ideology and to effect change in general if this were in the interests of the ruling elites. This scope for interaction has its origins both in historical factors and in the primary allegiance to a common language.

The historical reasons for this close urban–rural link are similar in the two regions. In West Bengal the original urban elites were drawn largely from individuals who already belonged to the landed rural aristocracy or else used their newly generated urban wealth (wealth generated in the process of becoming merchants and bankers in a fast-growing Calcutta under the East India Company) to become large landowners or *zamindars* under the framework of the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. In both cases, the newly educated Bengal elites thus tended to have strong rural connections.²⁹ Indeed, these connections usually included extended families (including, often, wives and children) left behind in the village, leading to a pervasive sense of nostalgia for the village of origin.

This nostalgia expressed itself in many ways. At the level of semantics it was evident in the way in which the urban elites of Bengal of the past (and often of today as well) refer differently to the city (or town) home and the village home: the former is the *basha* or temporary lodging, the latter is the *bari* or home (see, e.g., S. Sarkar 1997; Chatterji 1994; Chaudhuri 1968; Chakrabarty 1996). It was also expressed through regular visits to the villages to collect rents but also to socialize and keep up family connections; and through the development of a literature and a poetry that eulogized the countryside. That this nostalgia and this interaction did not leave the general rural population unaffected by the changes taking place in the metropolis is suggested by the partition of Bengal in 1905. Ostensibly motivated by administrative problems, it also had deeper roots in the threats perceived by Lord Curzon, Viceroy from 1898 to 1905, of an emerging middle-class nationalism in Bengal that he feared was being fueled by the close connections between Calcutta politicians and the East Bengal districts where many of them had their small-town or village homes (S. Sarkar 1997).³⁰

In Bangladesh, the Bengali-speaking leadership that emerged after the creation of Pakistan had even stronger and more intimate rural roots than the leaders of West Bengal. The urban Muslim intelligentsia that dominated the Calcutta of colonial India owed its primary allegiance to Urdu as a language and as a source of its culture, while Bengali Muslim culture was being considered an attribute of the lower-class Muslim peasantry (see, e.g., Murshid 1995; Ahmed 1996). Most of these *ashraf* moved to West Pakistan at the time of India's partition, and the new educated middle class that emerged

and found a voice in East Pakistan consisted mainly of Bengali-speaking middle-level landholders who moved to Dhaka and other urban centers. These migrants to the city maintained rural links in the same way as the Hindu *bhadralok* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In more recent times, the independence movement, which reinforced Bangladeshi nationalist identity, also strengthened the sense of commonality between the urban elites and the rural population and must be at least partly responsible for the rural zeal of the urban-based contemporary NGO movement in Bangladesh.

In both West Bengal and Bangladesh these urban–rural links have been reinforced by the earlier movements to simplify the Bengali language among the Hindus and Muslims of greater Bengal. This simplification of the language, at least among the Hindus of colonial Bengal, got its impetus from the growth of the print media.³¹ It also gained impetus from key individuals such as Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar (T. Sarkar 1997) and Rabindranath Tagore (Sen 1960), who were concerned about the elitist nature of the existing language and its inability to reach out to the general population. Among the Muslims in colonial Bengal, the simplification of the language was spurred by the new proselytizing efforts by Islamic leaders in the Bengal countryside (S. Sarkar 1997).

This trend toward simplification meant that a common language between urban and rural Bengalis (both Hindu and Muslim) was much more a truly common language than the earlier notional commonality in which the elite or educated Hindus and Muslims spoke a Bengali that was heavily Sanskritized or Persianized, respectively, while the illiterate population spoke and understood colloquial, simpler versions of the language.³²

Indeed, the growth of the print media together with the simplification of the Bengali language has been another important factor in fostering links between the elites and the masses in the two Bengals. This fostering has been possible in spite of slow increases in rural literacy, because a vital part of the success of printing rested on the way in which the ideas and stories on the printed page could be spread by the tradition of the literate few reading aloud to the illiterate many. Printing also reached a wider audience indirectly. For example, the advent of cheap and plentiful publishing democratized new ideas and thoughts because it included a spurt in the writing of literature for audiovisual performance; this in turn moved plays and performances from the exclusivity of the homes of rich patrons to the more accessible public theatres and halls that sprang up to

accommodate this new surge of popular writing (S. Sarkar 1997). Needless to say, this new printed and performed literature was not all “modern”—indeed, it often satirized the modern—but it nevertheless meant that more and more people were being exposed to and learning to tolerate new modes of thought and behavior.³³

These trends have survived over time, and, on the whole, it is reasonable to say that social permeability in the two Bengals has been effective enough to counter more conservative forces opposed to radical change. In Bangladesh in particular, it is striking how periodic attempts by conservative religious forces to block the women-oriented or otherwise modern programs of the government (in family planning, for example) have not stopped their promotion by the mainstream governmental and nongovernmental agencies or their acceptance by the general population even though it is largely rural, nonliterate, and Muslim.³⁴

As for the social change that can be accelerated by such urban–rural interactions, quite apart from the demographic example of the family planning program in Bangladesh, successful examples of mass mobilization abound in both Bengals. In West Bengal, the most striking manifestation of such interaction is political. The nearly quarter-century rule in West Bengal of the Communist Party of India (CPM) is remarkable for the way in which its leaders are mainly Western-style and often Western-educated city people (one scholar³⁵ refers to them as “radical gentlemen”) while its mass base is rural and vast. Indeed, the CPM has very little mass support in Calcutta or the larger urban areas (on the great rural penetration of the Communist Party in West Bengal, see Rogaly 1998); what it has been able to exploit effectively is the intimacy of the real and imagined urban–rural relationship in the state. A related example of successful interaction can be found in West Bengal’s early and wholehearted adoption of the system of *panchayati raj* (a parallel decentralized government) that India has adopted in principle since 1978, but that only West Bengal seems to have adopted in practice until recently (Webster 1992). And in Bangladesh, the mass mobilization programs of both the state and the nongovernmental sector (of which BRAC and the Grameen Bank are two examples) represent that country’s own brand of successful urban–rural interactions.

Moreover, in both West Bengal and Bangladesh, the new agricultural technology adopted in rural areas has meant that West Bengal in recent years has seen the fastest growth in agricultural production in the country, while Bangladesh saw a massive rise in

agricultural production in the 1980s (see Rogaly, Harriss-White, and Bose 1999; Ahmed, Haggblade, and Chowdhury 2000). This growth has occurred in contrasting policy environments in the two regions (a Communist Party focused on land reforms in West Bengal and a government focused on agricultural liberalization in Bangladesh), leaving researchers to decide which set of policies is more conducive to agricultural growth. But our analysis here suggests that perhaps more important than the policies themselves are the implementation of policies and the creation of an environment conducive to growth and change through the mass mobilization that characterizes the Bengal region.

Extending this discussion to fertility control, one can more easily explain the fertility decline that West Bengal has also experienced in spite of little official commitment to the family planning program, in contrast to the influential program in Bangladesh. One may also more confidently predict that a greater official commitment to a family planning program in the state may result in greater success than in some other parts of India. As for the governmental and NGO success in spreading birth control in Bangladesh, our analysis suggests it is not surprising that this diffusion process has not been as easy to duplicate in other parts of South Asia and the Middle East that share a common religion with Bangladesh but not a history of earlier modernization. For example, as Amin and Lloyd (1998) describe in their comparative analysis, Bangladesh has been much better able than Egypt to withstand the rise of religious opposition to many of its modernization efforts (at both the provider and the client level) without officially suppressing or opposing these fundamentalist groups.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has sought to endogenize the agents of social change in order to improve understanding of some of the conditions that facilitate fertility decline. It argues that looking solely at the immediate causes of reproductive change may distort our understanding of policy options by failing to take into account the historical and cultural factors that affect not only the impact of policies and programs but the very existence and nature of these policies and programs.

By presenting a joint study of Bangladesh and West Bengal, we have tried to demonstrate that historical and cultural factors are important influences on reproductive change. While the role of historical processes in social change has been neglected, the

role of culture tends to be obscured in contemporary debates on this issue that often view cultural attributes within purely political boundaries. Thus in research on Bangladesh, for example, culture is defined in terms of the educational levels of Bangladeshi women or their autonomy in movement and decisionmaking. At other times, the nature of Islamic marriage and the family is treated as the key cultural attribute. The little change that these various indicators have exhibited over the years is taken to demonstrate the irrelevance of social and cultural change to the fertility decline that is occurring there.

We have taken a somewhat different perspective on culture in this study. This perspective has two parts. On the one hand, cultural change is described in terms of changes in worldviews or ideologies as well as, to a lesser extent, in norms about appropriate behavior. Such cultural change may be reflected in changes in some cultural attributes and not in others. For example, it is possible for a change in family-size norms (one kind of cultural attribute) to occur without change in women's autonomy in movement (another cultural attribute). That is, declining fertility may be seen as a profound cultural change in itself rather than as an outcome of other kinds of cultural change.

Our second perspective on culture sees it as a facilitating variable: some cultural attributes of a population make it easier or harder for individuals to gain exposure to new ways of thinking and to respond positively to such new ideas. Moreover, there is more to this facilitating aspect of culture than women's education and the nature of the family. In particular, there is the strong impact of language (the Bengali language in this case), which often transcends the religious identity of a population (as witnessed most starkly in Bangladesh's independence movement) and which links the country with its Bengali counterpart in India (the state of West Bengal) in ways that few other cross-cultural interactions demonstrate. This continuous and intense interaction between Bangladesh and West Bengal and the strong sense of common identity conferred by the Bengali language are important sources of the diffusion of ideas and attitudes in both regions, so that the Bengali culture as a whole is often more progressive and open to outside influences than either Hindu or Muslim culture in general.

This observation could explain, for example, the conclusion by Dyson (1996) that the Bengali region of South Asia may have begun its fertility decline as early as

1960. It could also explain the convergence of fertility levels in Bangladesh and West Bengal³⁶ in spite of radically different policies in the field, and the vast gulf in fertility levels between two other contiguous but politically separate areas that speak the same language: the Punjabi-speaking regions of India and Pakistan (see, e.g., Ramesh 1996). In the Punjab case, all indications are that the language identity is not strong enough to overcome the communication barriers imposed by religion and by political borders. In the Bengal case, the role of cross-border interactions is also suggested by the commonality of fertility behavior in the districts along the border separating the two Bengals (Amin, Basu, and Stephenson 2000).

We have proposed that the best diffusion channels are those that are both homogeneous and heterogeneous; the Bengal experience suggests that each kind has a role to play. Homogeneous cultural networks (a common language in this case) can facilitate the transmission of new modes of thought and behavior; this facilitating role of language has been used to at least partly explain the European fertility transition as well as some contemporary transitions (see, e.g., Montgomery and Casterline 1998 and several chapters in Leete 1999). When the common language is also associated with a strong sense of loyalty to it, this ease of transmission is further facilitated because there is an urge to make it a vital means of communication between the elites and the masses: we have sought to demonstrate this point with examples of mass mobilizations by different entities in the two Bengals.³⁷

On the other hand, socioeconomic and geographic heterogeneity in diffusion channels increases exposure to the new ideas that are diffused; obviously one's immediate contacts have less that is new to tell us than do those who inhabit another, often larger world. The importance of heterogeneous networks is becoming apparent in studies that document the role of global networks in contemporary fertility decline (see, in particular, Bongaarts and Watkins 1996) and in the literature on the role of elites in fostering social change. Bengali-speaking elites or reference groups are thus important sources of transmission of new ideas among the general population. In addition, these groups have themselves been doubly blessed in this respect. On the one hand, they have the historical experience of early and intense exposure to the modern world in the ways described above; on the other hand, by occupying politically different spaces (that is, West Bengal

and Bangladesh), they continue to have interaction with and exposure to a wider religious, political, and policy world than do Muslim populations in other parts of the Islamic world and Hindu populations in other parts of India. The result, we suggest, is that the elites of Bangladesh and West Bengal display a greater intellectual and ideological progressiveness than their counterparts in these other regions, a progressiveness that has on occasion been communicated outward through the medium of a common language.

These findings may also be seen as contributing to a process of reflection on two matters. The first matter is methodological. While the policy community emphasizes national political boundaries with good reason, focusing research analysis on political boundaries may obscure important insights. In an increasingly interconnected world it makes sense to look at “outside” influences on behavior (e.g., Bongaarts and Watkins 1996); our study suggests that such influences and interactions are not merely a feature of contemporary technology. They may just as well exist between otherwise closed, politically demarcated areas that have a shared history and culture. To that extent, we may be wrong if we assume that the Bangladesh–West Bengal case is unique. Our guess, however, is that such a strong loyalty to a common language is rare. Thus, this kind of analysis needs to be strengthened through application to other parts of the world.

The second matter on which this study may throw some light is the absence of comparable fertility change in many other parts of the world. While it might not be much help to the impatient policymaker to be told that some populations are quicker to respond to antinatalist policies than others, by endogenizing policymakers and governance we hope to add to our understanding of the larger historical and cultural constraints on policymakers themselves. The central conclusion in this context is that for diffusion to serve as an effective channel of social change, two conditions must be satisfied: the elites must be sufficiently advanced themselves in the indicators of social change, and they must have strong channels of interactions with the general population. Slower social change in Latin America in spite of a modern elite may be explained by this elite’s virtually nonexistent interactions with the rural population; and slow change in sub-Saharan Africa in spite of strong networks of urban–rural interaction may be explained by the greater personal traditionalism of the elites (on both matters see Guzman 1994). In both regions, in short, there is only partial fulfillment of the two conditions necessary for change through diffusion.³⁸

Ours is not meant to be a completely deterministic model of social change; it leaves room for what may be called “quakes,” or sudden changes in a hitherto placid environment. Political upheavals provide the most potent example of this and may be especially relevant to the experience of rapid fertility change in countries such as Vietnam.³⁹ While such quakes may contribute to a rapid transformation of society, our article suggests that historical processes may otherwise leave an imprint that shapes a society’s predispositions for a long time to come.

Notes

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- 1 For a review of the latest thinking on the subject of diffusion processes in fertility decline, see the proceedings of the National Research Council’s Workshop on the Role of Diffusion Processes in Fertility Change and the subsequent summary report on the workshop (National Research Council 1999).
- 2 But it is not our contention in this article that the elites in the two Bengals have the interests of the general population more at heart than do the elites in other parts of the world. We merely assert that when they choose to effect mass change, for the historical and cultural reasons discussed here, the Bengali elites seem to be more successful than their counterparts elsewhere. As for their motivation in trying to effect such change, these may usually be self-serving. In this article we use such words as “elites,” “masses,” “liberal,” and “modern” in a merely descriptive way, without any of the value judgments, positive or negative, that the terms also usually imply.

- 3 Because this article is concerned with the potential influence of the elites on fertility control, and because fertility change may be viewed as a move from traditional to more modern forms of behavior, the elites described here are those who have themselves acquired the knowledge and opinions that go to form a modern worldview or ideology and who are in turn in a position to affect the beliefs and behaviors of others. In this sense and in this context, the elites may be defined loosely as the modern “intelligentsia” of a society, the intelligentsia in turn being defined, in the words of one of the most influential works on the subject, as those groups or individuals in a society “whose special task it is to provide an interpretation of the world for that society” (Mannheim 1936). To that extent we include more than the economic or political elites in our analysis. Indeed, there is much evidence not only that South Asian policy has traditionally been informed more by the intellectual than the political elites, but that the political elite has traditionally been drawn largely from the intellectual elites to begin with.
- 4 Although primary-level education in India is highest in Kerala, college levels of education are highest in West Bengal; see, e.g., International Institute for Population Studies (1995b).
- 5 The *micro*level political economy of reproductive change in particular and demographic change in general has, on the other hand, received much attention in recent years, especially with the growth of anthropological demography; indeed, this detailed attention to the household perspective has sometimes led to a neglect of the role of larger forces, including the state itself, in promoting change (see Basu 1997).
- 6 Nathanson (1996) makes a related point about some of the underlying social and political processes that promote or hinder successful health policies. It is often not enough to know that certain technologies are effective against certain diseases. When and how the policies that incorporate these technologies are implemented requires an understanding of the larger sociopolitical context.

- 7 As Inkeles (1983) discusses, Westernization refers to the adoption of the cultural and intellectual attributes of the Western world as they evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; at other times, individual modernity may well have been an attribute more common in non-Western cultures. On this, see also Sen (2000).
- 8 It is notable that the first signs of fertility decline in the United States appeared in New England after the Revolutionary War (Ewbank 1991), with another noticeable drop after the Civil War (David and Sanderson 1987).
- 9 Lesthaeghe and Wilson (1986) refer to an interesting earlier work by Wolf (1912), which broached this idea of a change in *Weltanschauung* being involved in changing fertility behavior. Wolf's analysis suggested a relationship between birth rates and the percentage of votes cast for the Socialist Party in Germany. This is an intriguing idea, of particular relevance to the Indian states of Kerala and West Bengal, which must be the only parts of the world to have had democratically elected Communist Parties in power for long periods of time. Kerala is recognized as a demographic pioneer, and, as we suggest in this article, West Bengal too has some unique features conducive to fertility decline.
- 10 The East India Company, once it gained formal administrative control of its Indian territories, divided these into three Presidencies: Bengal, Bombay, and Madras. From 1773, overall authority was invested in the Governor-General, who operated from Bengal Presidency and whose authority extended to the Governors who administered Bombay and Madras Presidencies. Over time and even more so after the Crown took over, these territories were expanded, reorganized, and renamed, but Calcutta remained the seat of the central government until 1911.
- 11 S. Sarkar (1997) would add the impact of *chakri*, the employment of the newly educated middle classes primarily in clerical positions in the British government in Bengal and other parts of India. The mixed effects of this employment are particularly important for the middle rungs of the newly literate, who did not contribute to the renaissance in the same way as the upper middle classes composed of lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, but who nevertheless acquired

and often unknowingly disseminated the new knowledge and ideas emanating from the latter.

- 12 To quote from Thomas Macaulay's Minute on Education of 1835, this education was needed to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect...who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern" (cited in Trevalyan 1961).
- 13 In addition, the moral and philosophical content of the Western educational syllabus in Bombay tended for a long time to inspire a reform of the self (that is, of the newly educated individual) rather than of the larger society (McDonald 1966), something that was at the root of the ideological content of the college syllabus in Calcutta.
- 14 Indeed, the philosophical content of this education virtually begged to be used in this way (see, e.g., Bagchi 1991). That this is by no means a uniquely Bengal phenomenon is illustrated in Anderson (1991).
- 15 Nevertheless, a rejection of the past and of traditional beliefs was also an important component of many debates during the Bengal renaissance. Several writers have described the heated debates on atheism that took place in many of the literary societies of the day (see, e.g., Sanyal 1980).
- 16 From the middle of the twentieth century, Malthusian arguments for reduced population growth were well entrenched and accepted by the elites of the Indian subcontinent. And while acceptance of such arguments explains the genesis of family planning programs in this region (see, e.g., Robinson 1996; Khuda et al. 1996), it does not explain how these similarly planned and motivated programs had such sharply different levels of success in various parts of South Asia. For example, the Malthusianism inculcated in the training of the bureaucracy that Khuda et al. mention as one factor in the fertility decline in Bangladesh was part of the training of the civil service in West Pakistan as well.
- 17 Indeed, it was only the upper-class (but not necessarily upper-caste) Hindu who

initially participated in this growth in modernization. Western-style education was expensive; when it was professional, it took many years; and its most popular subjects (literature and the humanities) were most consistent with the interests and aptitudes of a landed leisure class. For all these reasons, it often served merely to transform “an aristocracy of wealth” into an “aristocracy of culture” (Chatterji 1994).

- 18 As early as 1863, Abdul Latif, the most prominent Muslim public figure of Calcutta, started the Mahomedan Literary Society to “imbue its members with a desire to interest themselves in western learning and progress, and to give them an opportunity for the cultivation of social and intellectual intercourse with the best representatives of English and Hindoo society” (Latif, cited in Sanyal 1980). Also around this time, upper-class Bengali Muslim “intellectuals like Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Syed Ameer Ali, deeply influenced by Western ideas, began to give rational interpretations of the Koran and Hadith. They sought to differentiate between the ‘fundamentals’ and the ‘accidentals’ of Islam, and urged the adoption of the fundamentals as opposed to the ancillary aspects of their religion” (Akter Banu 1992: 175).
- 19 In a major ideological turnaround, the “socialism” pillar, too, was replaced, with “social justice.”
- 20 We use the terms “Bengali nationalism” and “Bengali identity” interchangeably in this article because “nationalism” in our analysis refers to “identity” without reference to “statehood.” That is, it does not follow that nationhood coincides with statehood. What we describe is a largely depoliticized concept of nationality, a “renunciation of the idea that those who feel themselves to be a nation should necessarily constitute an independent state of their own” (Prasad 1944). While Bengali nationalism did eventually lead to the creation of Bangladesh, this nationalism in the first place was not tied to questions of nationhood; its proponents were quite willing for it to exist within the larger political entity of Pakistan until its language identity was denied.

- 21 Perhaps this “self-obsession” (Chatterji 1994) is best illustrated by the Bengali word for those who belong to other parts of India. These individuals are described not as belonging, say, to Tamil Nadu, Punjab, or Kerala, but as *abangali*, that is, non-Bengali. In other words, there are the Bengalis, and there is everyone else.
- 22 *Bhadralok* is the Bengali term for the educated middle class, but actually means much more than this. It is the term used to describe the elites of Bengal by themselves and by the rest of the world, and its exact sense is best captured by a frequently quoted definition from Broomfield (1968), “a socially privileged and consciously superior group, economically dependent upon landed rents and professional and clerical employment” (pp. 12–13).
- 23 For example, the members of the Society for the Promotion of National Pride were fined one *paisa* for every word of English that they used at their meetings (Chowdhury 1998).
- 24 The movement also grew out of a resistance to other tendencies toward Islamization of the ruling government of West Pakistan—including attempts to introduce the Persian script for writing Bengali in East Pakistan and the periodic ban on performances and broadcasts of the music and arts of Hindu Bengalis such as Rabindranath Tagore.
- 25 There was growing opposition in East Bengal to the determination of the rulers of erstwhile Pakistan to have only Urdu as the official national language. This opposition culminated on 21 February 1952 in a series of well-orchestrated strikes and demonstrations organized by the newly formed State Language Action Council of East Pakistan. A number of demonstrators were killed in the police firing that followed the strikes, which the central government had anticipated and sought to prevent by the imposition of a ban on processions and strikes.
- 26 Personal interview (1999) with Mrs. Chitra Bhattacharya, Member of Parliament and prominent women’s activist, in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

- 27 Indeed, this constant interaction was a matter of concern to the government of Pakistan before the liberation of Bangladesh and led to futile attempts to ban the import of books, music, and films from West Bengal into East Pakistan in the 1960s. This ban probably did little more than fuel further the Language Movement that helped produce an independent Bangladesh.
- 28 These associations are usually quite active: the North American Bengali Association, for example, has a week-long conference (called the NABC by the initiated) every year, in which activities and events are organized that rely freely on expertise from both Bengals.
- 29 By contrast, in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, modern education was first taken up by groups that were predominantly urban, or, if they had begun life in the village, did not represent the more powerful or influential elements of the village.
- 30 Less charitable explanations of the interactions between the Bengali *bhadralok* and the rural population have focused on this being one way for the former to increase their power and patronage in colonial Bengal (see, e.g., Chowdhury 1998; Guha 1989).
- 31 It is interesting that the simplification of the Bengali language was originally motivated by the need to make the women of upper-class families better helpmeets to their rapidly modernizing husbands rather than to foster interclass communication. The women of upper-class families could not at first be sent out to schools to be educated; their education therefore had to come from magazines that catered to them in their own simpler, more colloquial Bengali. As Peary Chand Mitra pointed out in the inaugural issue of his magazine, *Masik Patra*, in 1854: “This magazine is published for ordinary people, particularly for women. All compositions will be written in a language in which we carry out our day to day conversations. If learned pandits wish to read this, they may do so, but this magazine is not for them.” Indeed, in his *Dialogues Intended to Facilitate the Acquiring of the Bengalee Language*, a compendium of the customs and language

of the different classes and castes of Bengal, published in 1801, the Orientalist William Carey classified women with the low castes for “the vulgarity of their speech” (Sangari and Vaid 1997).

- 32 The miscommunication possible between different groups that ostensibly speak the same language can occur even in the face of rising literacy levels, thus greatly hampering developmental efforts that hinge on the transmission of new ideas or instructions. Gumperz (1957) describes, in the case of north India, the high levels of misunderstanding by villagers with more than five years of schooling of simple governmental pamphlets; for the illiterate, who depended on having these pamphlets read to them, the misunderstanding was even more complete.
- 33 T. Sarkar (1997) illustrates the diverse opinions to which the Bengal population has long been exposed by popular print and visual media. A local case of adultery and murder in the late nineteenth century was publicized and discussed at so many levels and with so many interpretations through newspapers, popular plays, novels, and paintings that it ended up doing two important things: (1) it democratized the debates because different categories of people were all exposed to the moral, legal, and political issues through these varied forums; and (2) it exposed people to a variety of opinions on such issues—the guilty party being sometimes seen as the woman (for having an adulterous relationship), sometimes the husband (who murdered her), sometimes the priest (with whom she had the adulterous relationship), sometimes the colonial state (which convicted the husband of murder), and sometimes the system of patriarchy (which forced young wives to visit their parents for respite and in this case exposed the wife to the priest’s attentions). The main outcome of this widespread debate (and Sarkar stresses that her case is only illustrative) was that no notions or traditions were sacred; they could all be debated.
- 34 Indeed, it is striking just how limited the impact of conservative religious forces has been until recent years. Part of the resistance to the attempts of religious conservatives to forestall social changes may be attributed to their perceived role as collaborators in Pakistan’s governance of Bangladesh before 1971. This factor

undoubtedly helped President Ziaur Rahman to implement many programs—in the area of family planning and women’s employment, for example—that conservative religious leaders decried. But in addition, mass movements against religious fundamentalism seem to have emerged in response to a culture of positive attitudes to modernization. To quote an otherwise pessimistic scholar on Bangladesh (Feldman 1998), the Jama’at-I-Islami (the primary conservative religious party) “is continually challenged by an increasingly organized opposition, which has included a more vocal and organized women’s movement that has successfully mobilized rural women.”

35 Kamal Siddique (personal communication, 1999).

36 But this convergence may diverge again as fertility decline in Bangladesh continues at a faster pace because of greater official commitment to the decline.

37 That this social permeability is important is also suggested by the continuing conservatism of the lower-income Bangladeshi diaspora, in the United Kingdom for example. Not having access to interaction with culturally homogeneous reference groups, these immigrants are often much slower to change than the rural populations they have left behind.

38 In the modern world, diffusion processes may of course also be promoted by less interpersonal means. The mass media and good transportation come immediately to mind as examples.

39 Political upheavals are, in one sense, analogous to language identity in that they give otherwise diverse populations what may be called a shared worldview.

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