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DIRECTORATE OF
INTELLIGENCE

WEEKLY SUMMARY

Special Report

Oh, Calcutta!—India's Troubled State of West Bengal

Secret

№ 42

3 September 1971
No. 0386/71A

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OH, CALCUTTA! – INDIA'S TROUBLED STATE OF WEST BENGAL

In no other part of India is human suffering so widespread and intense as in West Bengal, India's second most densely populated state. Even in normal times, malnutrition, disease, and unsanitary conditions dominate the life of most inhabitants, and prospects for any relief grow increasingly dim.

In the five months since West Pakistan began its military offensive against secessionists in East Pakistan, fear and hunger have driven millions of East Pakistanis to seek refuge in neighboring West Bengal. Officials in the state are sympathetic to the plight of the refugees who, like themselves, are predominantly Hindu Bengalis. Nevertheless, they resent the massive burdens imposed by this human deluge, which only intensifies their host of already serious problems.

Politically, West Bengal has been a virtual battleground since 1967, when two decades of Congress Party domination gave way to a series of short-lived multiparty coalition governments in which the Communists played a dominant role. Although Prime Minister Gandhi's Ruling Congress Party made a surprising electoral comeback last March, the coalition it formed lasted only until June because of internal squabbling and pressures arising from the Pakistani crisis.



Refugee mother and child

The state has almost no hope for political stability in the near future. A penchant for political extremism has long flourished among the Bengalis; it is currently manifest in their continued public support for and fatalistic tolerance of such radical groups as the terrorist Naxalites. The Marxist Communists, whose aim is to destroy the parliamentary system, are the strongest political force in the state. Despite increased police suppression, numerous other ultraleft parties have stayed in the field, urging peasants and industrial workers to join them in armed revolt.

For the third time in as many years, New Delhi has assumed administrative control of West Bengal, and is now making special efforts to oversee and underwrite the cost of refugee relief. At the same time, though probably without hope of success, it is attempting to quell politically inspired violence and to stem further economic deterioration. The Pakistani civil war has infinitely complicated the task.

The Importance of West Bengal

New Delhi's concern arises partly from the fact that West Bengal's importance to the national economy is out of proportion to its physical size. The state has a virtual monopoly on jute manufactures, India's major foreign exchange earner, and also produces about a quarter of the second largest earner, tea. West Bengal industries also still produce a sizable share of the nation's output; although economic progress has trailed far behind the national average since independence, when it was India's wealthiest state.

Calcutta, the capital, is India's largest city, with slightly over seven million in the Calcutta Metropolitan District. Dominating the whole of eastern India, it serves as the region's main production and distribution center for goods and services, the banking hub for public and private enterprises, and the headquarters for major companies and other organizations. Although the tonnage cleared through its port has declined sharply since 1966, it remains important, especially to service the vast iron and steel industrial complex within a 300-mile radius of Calcutta.

New Delhi's interest in this geographically strategic area has grown more acute as a result of the Pakistani crisis and the official Indian support for East Bengali secessionists who conduct cross-border guerrilla operations from various points along the 1,200 miles of porous East Pakistan - West Bengal border. The threat of an Indo-Pakistani war erupting in the eastern region of the subcontinent hangs heavy over Bengali officials attempting to feed and shelter six million refugees and simultaneously restore some order and control in the political and economic chaos that has wracked West Bengal without letup during the past four years. But, if West Bengal is a major economic asset to the modern Indian union, Calcutta itself presents one of India's most serious social problems.



Life on the streets—the fate of millions



*Thus the midday halt of Charnock—more's the pity!—
Grew a City.
As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed,
So it spread—
Chance-directed, chance-erected, laid and built
On the silt—
Palace, byre, hovel—poverty and pride—
Side by side;
And, above the packed and pestilential town,
Death looked down.*

R. Kipling

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The Misery of Calcutta

Abominable living conditions rank Calcutta high among the world's most dismal cities, and it groans under a staggering population. Its history, nevertheless, has been one of continuous expansion. As the British capital of India, Calcutta lured rural Bengalis who were desirous of the Westernized, English-language education that the colonists promoted as a means of grooming employees for clerkships in mercantile houses and the civil service. The British further accelerated urban migration by imposing a land tenure system that seriously limited the ability of Bengalis to live solely off their landholdings. This fostered the growth of a large urban middle class, which in turn bred an intelligentsia versed in Western liberalism. The Indian nationalist movement took root in Bengal, and Bengalis were prominent among the founders of the Congress Party in the latter half of the 19th century.

When India was granted independence in 1947, Bengal was split into Muslim-dominated East Pakistan and Hindu-dominated West Bengal. Partition caused a continuous but fluctuating flow of Hindu Bengalis from East Pakistan into West Bengal; at least four million settled in West Bengal and about one million in the Calcutta area in the years before the current crisis.

New arrivals in Calcutta have long followed a pattern of congregating in sections of the city where members of their own religious, caste, or ethnic community are settled. The city is actually a patchwork of enclaves where Muslims and other minorities live together, speak regional languages, and observe their traditional practices. The majority of nonrefugee migrants are males who have left their families in the village in hopes of finding employment as coolies or factory labor in the city, which probably has the highest unemployment rate in India. Thus, Calcutta's population is weighted by a high percentage of unemployed, uprooted males—many coming from neighboring states—who live in slum-like conditions with the expectation of eventually returning to their rural

homes. They represent pockets of poverty and discontent that are easily identified and readily accessible to political extremists seeking recruits.

A Proliferation of Radical Extremists

Although Calcutta has appeared to Western observers as the obvious focus for a campaign of political radicalization, it is only in the past two years that the ultraleft movements of independent India have made the city their major target.

The Communist Party of India/Marxist (CPM), which by 1967 succeeded a faction-ridden Congress organization as the leading influence in the political life of West Bengal, sought first to wreck the state's parliamentary and bureaucratic machinery. One CPM faction, which favored Mao-style mass revolution in the countryside, considered even this tactic tainted with "parliamentarism." In March 1967, a day after the first CPM-dominated coalition government took office in Calcutta, this faction inspired a peasant revolt in the Naxalbari District of northern West Bengal. Although the CPM leaders in the government opposed strong repressive measures, apparently hoping for a reconciliation with the extremists, they finally sent in forces to quell the insurrection. In 1969, the Naxalites (as they had become known), with prompting from Peking, formally broke from the CPM and founded a more radical Communist party, the Communist Party/Marxist-Leninist (CPML).

Ironically, the Naxalites' split from the CPM was followed shortly by a shift away from rural revolution. Toward the end of 1969, despite the insistence of the leading Naxalite theoretician, C. P. Mazumdar, on the necessity of establishing a firm rural base, pressure developed within the movement to begin urban guerrilla activities in and around Calcutta. In part, this was a result of the Naxalites' failure to win mass support in the countryside because of peasant apathy and competing attempts, some government-led, to effect land reform. Moreover, the middle-class Calcutta

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college students who were recruited to politicize the peasants and tribal peoples proved generally unsuccessful in the unfamiliar rural environment; most returned to their urban homes as police surveillance became increasingly effective.

Politics of Annihilation

Thus, in early 1970 the Naxalites focused on Calcutta and, since then, terrorism and violence have persisted there almost unabated. Mazumdar tried to justify this deviation in priority as an attack on the bourgeois superstructure whose base was simultaneously being undermined by the Naxalites' "annihilation program" in the country. In Calcutta, the students initially began attacking schools and libraries, disfiguring statues of national heroes, and bombing theaters.

Although the state government could remain somewhat indifferent to Naxalite activity in the villages, it could not ignore the mounting violence in Calcutta. Police action became more effective,

particularly after the second CPM-dominated government fell in March 1970, and President's Rule was again imposed from New Delhi. Thousands of Naxalite suspects were arrested, their publications were confiscated, and some were tortured.

Repression, however, seemed only to trigger more terrorist acts, now aimed at capitalists, black-marketeers, the police, and the military. "Antisocial" elements—a generic term used by the Indians to refer to a broad spectrum of malcontents, antigovernment intellectuals, thugs, and underworld elements—joined the extremists. Originally CPML ideologues made some effort to indoctrinate the "antisocials," but police interrogators reported that many of the detainees, as well as top guerrilla leaders, were doctrinally uninformed. In fact, large numbers flocked to the Naxalite banner, not to further the party cause, but for political cover to settle old scores with the police and personal political rivals, particularly within the CPM. Mazumdar did not repudiate the "antisocials" because they were ready to carry out his annihilation program, while the middle-

class Naxalites who still form the 5,000-member hard core of the movement tended to shrink from wanton murder of "class enemies." At the same time, however, student involvement in urban guerrilla activities has declined. By April 1971, all 57 colleges in Calcutta had reopened, and in June some 100,000 college students appeared for examinations.

There has thus been some, but not much, comfort for the government's security forces. In West Bengal, there are now at least nine Maoist groups active under different labels, fighting for supremacy and accusing each other of "Cheism" and revisionism. They tend to divide over the usefulness of indiscriminate killing and whether the peasants or industrial

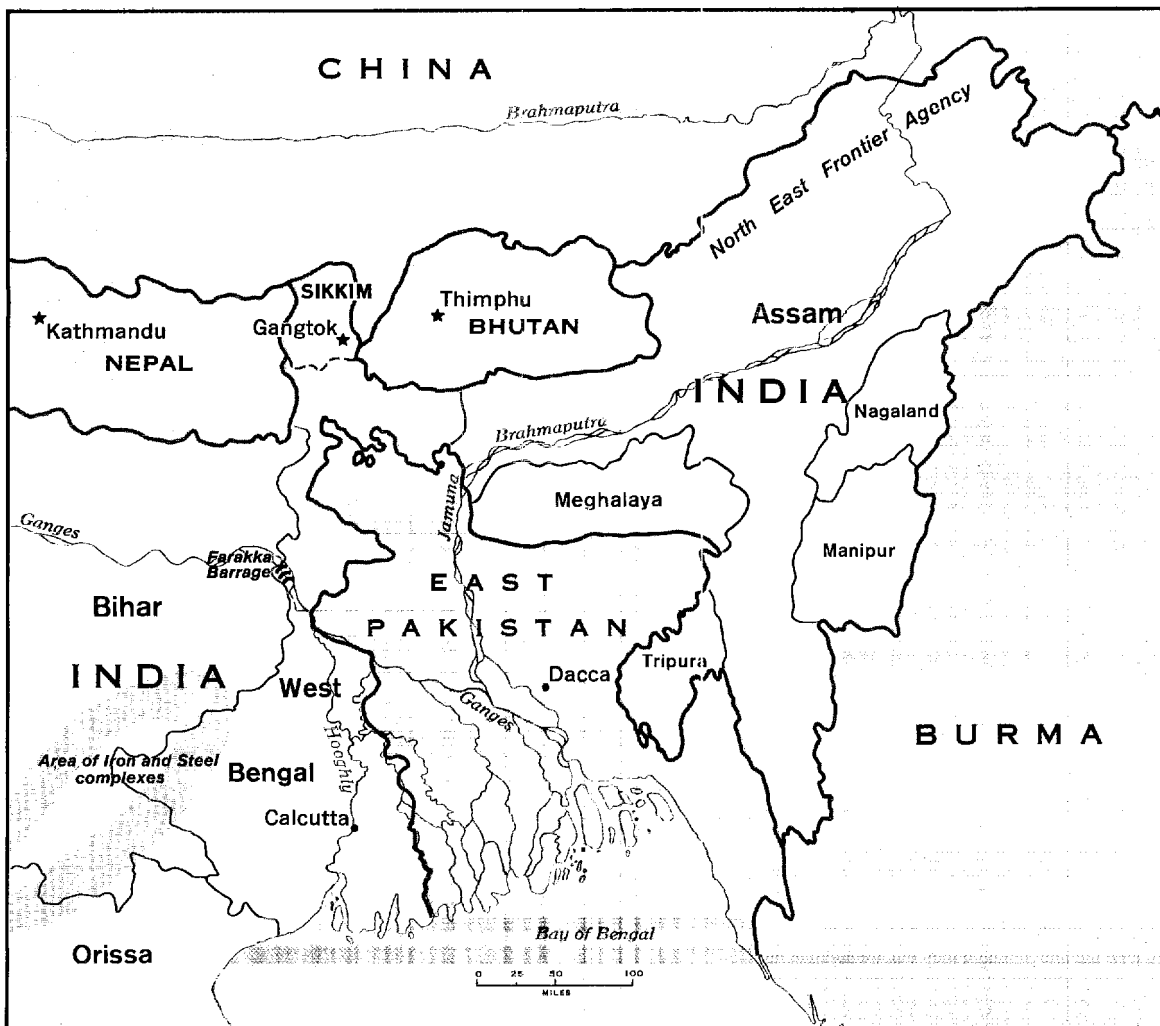
NAXALITE ACTIVITIES IN WEST BENGAL

(According to Official Indian Figures)

| | 12-Month Period April 1970 - March 1971 | 3½-Month Period April - 15 July 1971 |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| Interparty clashes | 1,049 | 238 |
| Political murders | 636 475† | 412 340 |
| Attacks on police | 1,506 808† | 431 255 |
| Police killed | 69 66† | 41 40 |
| Police injured | 1,155 675† | 227 155 |

† Naxalites believed responsible.

* In Naxalite attacks.



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workers should form the vanguard of revolution. Their tendency toward a high degree of decentralization, however, compounds the difficulties of keeping track of their activities. Within the CPML, for instance, there are hundreds of small "action squads" that operate independently and without guidance from any higher authority.

Police estimate that more than half of the approximately 1,300 murders that have been committed—and reported to the police—in West Bengal this year were politically motivated. Probably the largest number of these were the result of CPM-CPML feuding. The CPM's fear of losing its remaining extremist fringe to the Naxalites keeps the two groups constantly at odds. CPM leader Jyoti Basu, whose party won the largest number of seats in the March state elections but failed to pull together a coalition, has alleged that the Naxalites are encouraged in their anti-CPM assassinations by the non-Communists, including the Ruling Congress Party and others who fear Marxist proliferation. Today, an average of eight to ten political murders occurs daily in the state. Pipe-guns, home-made bombs, daggers, and swords comprise the extremists' arsenal and are supplemented by a small supply of guns, mostly stolen from the police. It is possible that some of the arms intended for Pakistani guerrillas are finding their way into the hands of the Naxalites.

West Bengal's Relations with New Delhi

New Delhi's efforts to bring a semblance of political and social order, especially through the imposition of President's Rule, are met with mixed feelings in West Bengal. Many residents of Calcutta undoubtedly greet central control with relief, because the seemingly endless chain of strikes, murders, demonstrations, and street violence hurts business and is generally disruptive. The coalition government formed after the elections in March fell after only three months in office, partly in response to mounting dissatisfac-

tion from student and youth elements within the Ruling Congress Party over the government's lack of tangible accomplishment and failure to diminish violence.

But the central government's role in West Bengal is also resented, for reasons well grounded in Bengali history. Bengal has always been on the periphery of the great Hindu empires and probably was the area least subject to central control. Although the region shares basic affinities with other parts of India, it is also a distinct cultural region. Most Bengalis are Hindus, but Bengali Hindus differ in many important aspects from other Hindus; unorthodox Hindu cults in the region have been a major factor in the formation of a distinctly Bengali culture and literature. The quick-witted Bengalis are exceedingly proud of their language, one of the most highly developed on the subcontinent. They attach great importance to intellectual and educational attainments and disdain manual labor. For much of the pre-independence period, Calcutta was India's major center of higher education, and Bengalis contributed a large percentage of India's writers, artists, and intellectuals.

The period since independence, however, is etched with disappointment and frustration. The partition of Bengal in 1947 into predominantly Hindu West Bengal and Muslim-dominated East Pakistan was the last of a long series of partitions. These reduced the state to less than one seventh of the size of Greater Bengal a century ago and left only one third of the Bengali-speaking people under the state's administrative control. The shift of political power to Hindi-speaking areas and the central government's promotion of Hindi and a Hindi-speaking culture adds to the Bengalis' resentment of New Delhi and a growing sense of alienation. Moreover, while Bengalis look to New Delhi for financial support, they also complain that their state never receives an equitable share of federal assistance.

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Efforts to Improve the Situation

New Delhi's intrusion in Bengali affairs has increased steadily during the last six months. Last winter, the central government took the unprecedented step of deploying soldiers to assist West Bengal police in ensuring peaceful and fair state and national elections. The presence of 50,000 troops undoubtedly played a key role in encouraging a surprisingly high voter turnout (60 percent), despite the murder of four candidates during the campaign. Military units continue to supplement local security forces, but the troops could be reassigned to more conventional duties in border areas as Indo-Pakistani tensions rise.

The formation of a Ruling Congress-dominated coalition last April lent hope that some progress could be made toward restoring more normal economic conditions. Harassment of businesses by *gherao* (a tactic whereby workers imprison management personnel in their offices without food or water until the workers' demands are conceded) has declined. Nevertheless, factories continue to close because of labor problems and material shortages, profits and investment capital continue to leave the state, and an atmosphere of insecurity pervades the business community. As a result, there is an absence of new industrial investment, and most major firms are planning to expand in more tranquil states. Frequent strikes and interunion clashes have accomplished little more than to contribute to the state's economic decline.

Despite this generally grim picture, a World Bank assessment—formulated before the Pakistani crisis—saw some room for hope in West Bengal. Mild optimism centered on the creation last September of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Agency (CMDA). There have been many plans for arresting decay and stimulating development in Calcutta, but the CMDA is unique in its command of resources and wide-ranging power, as well as in its ability to finance, coordinate, and

supervise whatever programs it deems necessary. A \$200-million program has been drawn up and, although financing has not been completed, new sources of funding have been found. A tax has been imposed on goods entering the metropolitan area, and \$8.6 million has been borrowed by means of public bonds, the first time in years that any Calcutta authority has successfully entered the bond market. Special assistance, about \$40 million, is expected from New Delhi. Previous



Pakistani refugees being transferred by train from West Bengal to other parts of India

development efforts have been stymied by lack of resources, by uncoordinated executing agencies, and by institutional and political difficulties, but the CMDA has moved ahead with unusual dispatch. In addition, a sorely needed second bridge to span the Hooghly and give Calcutta another link with the rest of India is scheduled to begin in the near future.

Bengali officials have insisted that New Delhi must bear the financial burden of refugee care and are pressing for the dispersal of the refugees to other states. So far, however, only a fraction have been transferred, partly because New Delhi is reluctant to lessen the slight chance that at least some of the refugees might return home. Meanwhile, food prices have risen 10-30 percent and wages have fallen as much as 40 percent because of the glutted labor supply.

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