



## One-day Seminar

on

### *“Colonialism, Modernity and Social Change in Bengal: A Historical Hindsight”*

In collaboration with IQAC, RBU

**RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY**  
Centre for Distance and Online Education  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
in collaboration with  
IQAC, Rabindra Bharati University

# COLONIALISM, MODERNITY AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN BENGAL

## A HISTORICAL HINDSIGHT

**A ONE-DAY SEMINAR**  
27  
MARCH  
2026  
ROOM 604

Venue: EE 9 & 10, Sector II, Salt Lake City, Kolkata - 700091

### PLENARY SPEAKERS

**PROF. ASHIS KUMAR DAS**  
PROFESSOR  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY

**PROF. ANURADHA KAYAL**  
PROFESSOR  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY

**PROF. AJANTA BISWAS**  
PROFESSOR  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY

### CHAIRPERSON

**PROF. MAHUA SARKAR**  
PROFESSOR  
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

**CONVENORS**  
DR. SUMANA GHOSAL  
DR. SOUMYADEB MAITI  
(ASSISTANT PROFESSORS  
RABINDRA BHARATI UNIVERSITY, CDOE)

History can be analyzed by dividing it into broad periods or ages, such as Prehistory, Ancient History, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Era, each characterized by distinct societal structures, technological advancements, and cultural developments. History writing, or historiography, has evolved significantly across different regimes, reflecting the values, priorities, and perspectives of the ruling powers and societies. From ancient chronicles to modern academic disciplines, historiography has been shaped by various factors, including political context, social structures, and intellectual movements. To understand this in details, the *Department of History, Rabindra Bharati University - Center for Distance and Online Education, (RBU CDOE)* organized a One-Day Seminar on *“Colonialism, Modernity and Social Change in Bengal: A Historical Hindsight”* on 29.03.2026.

Eminent guests of the event, Professor Mahua Sarkar, Former Professor, Jadavpur University, Professor Ashis Kumar Das, Professor, Rabindra Bharati University, Professor Anuradha Kayal, Professor, Rabindra Bharati University Professor Ajanta Biswas, Professor, Rabindra Bharati University, Dr. Kiran Sankar Chakraborty, Director, RBU, CDOE, and Shri Ram Krishna Mal, OSD Finance, inaugurated the event by offering their respects to Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore. All esteemed guests were felicitated by Director of RBU CDOE. The welcome address and Inaugural Speech were delivered by The Director, RBU CDOE, whereby he highlighted the significance of this event and introduced and introduced the eminent speakers of the day.



**Felicitations of eminent guests Prof. Mahua Sarkar, Prof. Ashis Kumar Das, Anuradha Kayal and Prof. Ajanta Biswas by Director of RBU CDOE**

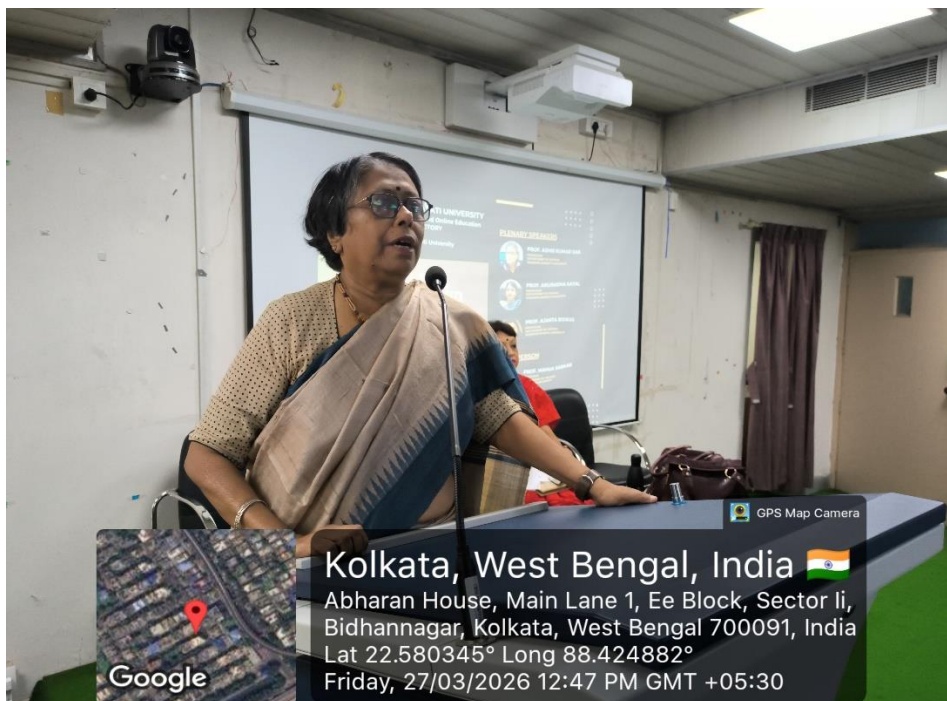


**Felicitations of Hon'ble Director, Dr. Kiran Sankar Chakraborty, RBU, CDOE, and Shri Ram Krishna Mal, OSD Finance, RBU, CDOE.**

### Plenary Sessions

The seminar featured distinguished plenary speakers and was initiated with an insightful opening by the Chairperson:

- **Prof. Mahua Sarkar (Chairperson)** set the tone for the plenary session by offering a comprehensive conceptual overview of the seminar theme, "*Colonialism, Modernity and Social Change in Bengal: A Historical Hindsight.*" She contextualized colonialism not merely as a political or economic phenomenon but as a transformative historical process that reconfigured social relations, knowledge systems, and cultural practices in Bengal.



**Deliberation by Former Prof. Mahua Sarkar,  
Dept. of History, Jadavpur University**

She emphasized that modernity in Bengal must be understood as a layered and contested process—simultaneously enabling reform, education, and new public spheres, while also reinforcing hierarchies, exclusions, and colonial dominance. By drawing attention to the intersections of economy, society,

culture, and politics, she highlighted how colonial interventions produced both continuity and rupture within indigenous structures.

Her address provided a cohesive analytical framework for the subsequent deliberations, encouraging participants to critically engage with the complexities of social change and to move beyond linear or Eurocentric interpretations of modernity.

- **Prof. Ashis Kumar Das** delivered a nuanced lecture on the relationship and transition between communalism and modernity in colonial Bengal. He argued that modernity in the Indian context did not evolve as a purely secular or rational process; rather, it remained deeply entangled with emerging communal identities. He highlighted how colonial administrative policies, census classifications, and representational politics contributed to the consolidation of religious identities, thereby reshaping social relations.



**Deliberation by Prof. Ashis Kumar Das, Dept. of History, RBU**

Further, he critically examined the question of why capitalism did not develop robustly in India, with special reference to West Bengal. He pointed out that colonial economic policies led to a form of dependent or distorted capitalism, where indigenous industrial growth was constrained by imperial interests. In the case of Bengal, despite early exposure to colonial modern institutions, factors such as deindustrialization, the dominance of landlordism under the Permanent Settlement, lack of indigenous capital accumulation, and the absence of a strong bourgeois class hindered the organic growth of capitalism. He also emphasized the role of socio-cultural structures and political conditions that limited entrepreneurial expansion and industrial transformation.

- **Prof. Anuradha Kayal** focused on the dynamics of colonial modernity and the emergence of white-collar groups in Bengal. She elaborated on how colonial modernity facilitated the rise of a new class of educated intermediaries—particularly clerks—who became integral to the colonial administrative machinery. Tracing developments during the period 1905–1908, she highlighted the evolving socio-political consciousness of clerical workers in the backdrop of the Swadeshi Movement following the Partition of Bengal.

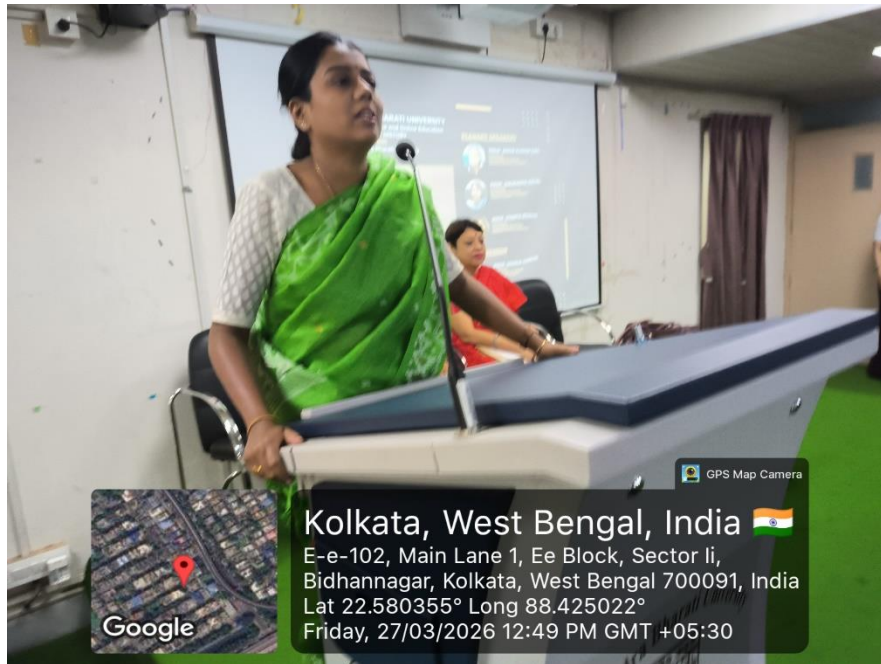


### Deliberation by Prof. Anuradha Kayal, Dept of History, RBU

She argued that although clerks were structurally embedded within the colonial system, many of them participated in the Swadeshi Movement in subtle and indirect ways—through practices such as promoting indigenous goods, informal networks of communication, and passive resistance within bureaucratic spaces. This “silent participation” reflected both their constrained positionality and their growing nationalist sentiments.

Additionally, she discussed the emergence and transformation of *babu culture* in Bengal, interpreting it as a product of colonial modernity. The *babu* was portrayed not merely as a caricature of mimicry but as a complex socio-cultural figure negotiating between tradition and modernity, colonial authority and indigenous identity. She emphasized that this class played a crucial role in shaping early public discourse, education, and administrative practices in Bengal.

- **Prof. Ajanta Biswas** discussed the role of urbanization in shaping the historical trajectory of Bengal, with a focused case study on Murshidabad during the colonial period. She examined how Murshidabad, once a prominent pre-colonial urban and political centre, underwent significant transformations under colonial rule. The shift of political power and administrative importance to Calcutta led to a relative decline in Murshidabad’s status; however, it continued to function as an important regional urban node.
- She elaborated on the economic implications of this transition, noting the restructuring of traditional industries, changes in trade networks, and the gradual decline of artisanal production. At the same time, new forms of economic activities and intermediaries emerged, linking the region to the broader colonial economy.



### **Deliberation by Prof. Ajanta Biswas, Dept. of History, RBU**

From a social perspective, she highlighted changes in class composition, occupational patterns, and urban lifestyles, as well as the persistence of elite structures tied to earlier regimes. Politically, she pointed out how urban shifts influenced patterns of governance, local power configurations, and the emergence of new forms of civic engagement. Through this analysis, she demonstrated that urbanization in colonial Bengal was not merely a process of growth but also one of displacement, restructuring, and uneven development.

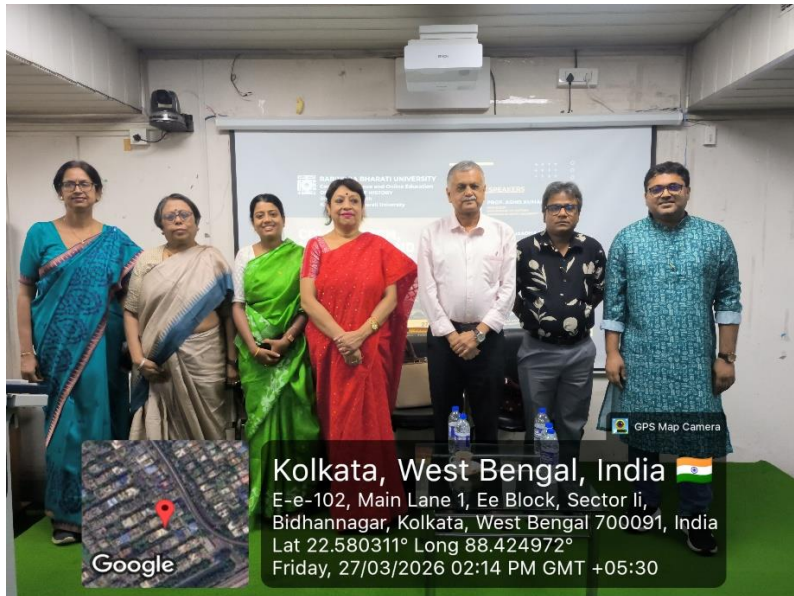
Each session was followed by interactive discussions, allowing participants to engage critically with the themes presented.

The session was chaired by **Prof. Mahua Sarkar**, who delivered a thought-provoking address synthesizing the key ideas presented. She emphasized the need for nuanced historical analysis and the relevance of colonial studies in understanding present-day socio-political realities.

The seminar witnessed active participation from faculty members, research scholars, and students. The discussions were intellectually stimulating, reflecting diverse perspectives and methodological approaches within historical inquiry.

The seminar concluded with a vote of thanks by the convenors, **Dr. Sumana Ghosal** and **Dr. Soumyadeb Maiti**, who acknowledged the contributions of speakers, participants, and organizing members.

Overall, the event was academically enriching and successfully fostered critical engagement with the themes of colonialism, modernity, and social change in Bengal. It reaffirmed the importance of historical scholarship in addressing contemporary societal questions.



**Resource Persons, Director of CDOE, RBU and Faculty Members of Department of History**



**Students Engaging themselves in the Discussions Post Plenary Session**