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The Cultural Heritage of Bangladesh

Selim Al Deen

Translation by

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The word heritage refers to a contemporary interest in outlining an overall form that naturally stands apart in the interwoven histories of *jati*¹-s, communities and the country. Culture is shaped through integrating a part of that heritage with networks of national and global politics and economics. Once a philosopher of language in the subcontinent opined the fact that something does not belong to the present does not imply that it cannot be accommodated within the present. Had it been the case, the present would not have been a temporal marker. Culture too is part of this eternal present.

In the past, among the names of the neighbouring geographical territories such as Gauda, Banga, Samatata, Harikel, Chandradwip and Rarh, the name Banga came to be associated with the whole region and shaped up the nation called Bangladesh. The political philosophy of modern times does not take into account the ancient kingdoms and their geographical borders. However, the nation happens to be a remarkable construct of the modern man. Different communities, *jati*-s and tribes converge under the folds of a single nation. The intellect, rationality and the democratic values of the modern man form the cornerstone of a nation. Today's Bangladesh happens to be a sovereign power within its defined territorial limits. Therefore, the cultural heritage of the different *jati*-s, tribes and



communities who inhabit this territory needs to be considered within the rubric of the nation. One should search for the strand that unifies divergent cultural practices within the land that comes to be known as the nation.

The philosophies of *Sankhya* and *Yoga* which the Bengali populace can call their own were practiced in Bengal before the beginning of the Christian era. The Buddhist doctrine of rebirth came under the influence of these practices and the doctrine of *sahajiya* Buddhism emerged. The members of an ancient religious sect in Bengal who were known as the Siddhacharya-s wrote the remarkable lyrical verses of *Charyapad*. According to scholars such as Dr. Muhammed Shahidullah, the gazals of Iran owe their origin to *Charyapad*. One can trace the imprints of our lyrical bend of mind in the tradition of the verses pioneered by the Siddhacharya-s.

If we take into account the pan-Indian context, it can be said that the splendour of visual arts during the reign of the Pal dynasty shaped our aesthetic sensibility in an unprecedented way. In those paintings we see that the ears, neck and arms of the female figures are adorned in different jewellery. The Siddhacharya-s practised renunciation—they coated their naked bodies in ashes and devoted themselves to the steadfast pursuit of immortality through several *yogamudra*-s.

During the reign of the Sen dynasty, the Brahminical culture came to be associated with aristocracy. Ballal Sen and his successors tried to carve out a tradition of a highbrow, aristocratic culture. However, *Gitagobinda* by Jayadeb, Lakhsman Sen's court poet, bears testimony to the fact that - this attempt did not influence the aesthetics of literature in Bengal. The text employed a language which was an amalgamation of Prakrit and Sanskrit and the poetics resonated with the spirit of the *Mangala* tradition of drama. During this period, dance



forms came under the influence of the contemporary traditions prevalent in the Southern part of the subcontinent. The influence can be traced in the dance of Padmabati. The practice of *varnashram*² was prevalent in Lakshman Sen's court. The low-born weavers had to face a severe consequence due to the humorous incident orchestrated by Sheikh Shubhodayay and Natogango. A spiritual leader, Darbesh Jalaluddin Tabrizi came to Bengal around this time. It is indeed surprising that he was an enthusiast of the music of Jayadeb and his wife. He also appreciated the dance of the courtesan Sashikala and duly rewarded her. Lakshman Sen became his follower. The tales of the Sheikh's pious ways and his supernatural powers found a place in the contemporary *bhadu* songs.

This era is followed by the conquest of Bengal by the Muslims. The *Sunyapurana* has references to the tales of the gods and goddesses to Islam. The spiritual leaders who preached the ideals of *Sufisim* that emerged in Iraq, Iran and Turkey were honoured and revered in Bengal. People belonging to the lower strata of society sought solace in those ideals. In the fifteenth century, we encounter the development of two distinct literary traditions—the longstanding tradition of religious literature and the newly emerged tradition as exemplified in the romance narrative of the *Yusuf-Zulekha panchali*. This diversity adds a new dimension to the cultural heritage of Bengal.

Alongside the tradition of worshipping gods and goddesses, the practice of *seba*, as introduced by the *pir*-s became popular in Bengal around the same time. The cults of Satyanarayan and Satyapir merged into one. The mass appeal of the *panchali*-s of Satyapir composed around this time, cut across the Hindu and Muslim population.

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries the monotheism and the *Fana fillah* doctrine of Islam gave rise to the doctrine of Krishna pioneered by Chaitanyadeb. It was also



known as *Achintya Dvaitabad*. This philosophical doctrine influenced the way of life in contemporary Bengal as well as the aesthetic traditions in the spheres of dramaturgy, poetry and *patachitra*³

During the rule of Alauddin Hussain Shah, Bengal reached the pinnacle of prosperity. The reign of the Muslim rulers facilitated the incorporation of Arabic and Persian words into the vocabulary of Bengali language. It is a widely known fact that the war-epic *Mahabharat* was translated around this time due to the enthusiasm of the Muslim commander Paragal Khan and his son Chhuti Khan. The Muslim rulers also patronised the translations of *Ramayan* and *Shrikrishnabijay Kabya*.

The Bengali *Mangalkabya* happens to be the encyclopedia of the medieval period. The form of our epics lies within its structure. The *Mangalkabya* comprises the depiction of everyday, societal realities of the Hindu and Muslim population.

In the sixteenth century, poets such as Daulat Kazi and Syed Alaol inaugurated a non-communal poetic tradition that celebrated the ethos of humanity.

In *Gajipir's panchali* of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, we encounter the fact that Ganga happens to be the maternal aunt of Gajipir. Manasa, the goddess of snakes is his sister. The fairies prepare the bed and arrange for a ring for Mukut Roy's daughter. The figure of Shahpari (adapted from the Iranian tradition) builds cities and mosques under the instruction of Gaji Kalupir.

Satyapir's panchali was written by Tahir Mahmud and his disciple Krishnahari Das. In Akrishnaram Das's *Raymangal*, we encounter the fact that God himself intervenes in the war between Dakshin Ray and Gajipir. He settles the dispute and makes them befriend each other. Our culture therefore, springs from a generous amalgamation of Hindu and Islamic



ethos.

Alongside these traditions, one should also mention the native traditions of the tribal communities of Bangladesh. The cultures of the Chakma, Marma, Byom, Santal, Rakhain, Garo and Hajong community have developed as distinct traditions. However, in modern times, the forces of a democratic nation try to straitjacket those divergent traditions into one homogenous structure.

The dance of the Chakma-s, the folklore of the Marma-s, the song and dance of the Santal-s on the theme of creation, the dance of the Garo-s have recently become popular in Bangladesh. One can say for example that a play called *Ekti Marma Rupkatha*, adapted from the folklore of the Marma-s has regularly been staged in Dhaka. The song and dance sequences of the play imitate the practice of the Marma-s. Marma-s are primarily Buddhists. A scrutiny of the historical and the contemporary traditions thus foregrounds the fact that our cultural heritage has always been premised upon liberal ethos irrespective of questions concerning tribes, communities, religion and social standing. The people of Bangladesh too wish to uphold the humanitarian ethos prevalent across the world. Our history provides us the inspiration to weave various cultures into one unifying bond. The extremist ideals of bigotry, sectarianism and partisan nationalism undermine the spirit of culture. The outcome of those ideals is evil. The history of this nation's past reminds us that we all live under the same sky that has the sun, the moon and the stars etched upon it. I strongly believe that the culture of our country is an integral part of the liberal ethos that the world's civilization endorses.



Endnotes:

¹ *Jati* literally translates to 'birth' and refers to the clan, tribe, community or even the sub-community which one may belong owing to one's birth.

² The Sanskrit term *varna* means to classify, describe or choose. According to the *Rigveda*, *varna* is decided based on one's outward appearance, exterior form or figure whereas according to the *Manusmriti*, *Varna*-s are social classes. Most texts in Hinduism talk about four *varna*-s, i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Often, the last *varna* is considered to be outside of the *varṇa* system. *Varṇashram* is to segregate on the basis of one's *varna*.

³ The word *patachitra* comes from the Sanskrit terms 'patta' meaning 'canvas' and 'chitra' meaning 'picture'. Traditionally *pattachitra* was done on scrolls using natural colours and depicted stories from Indian mythology and talked about the lives of Hindu gods and goddesses.