

# THE BENGALIS: A THOUSAND YEARS

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The last few days of a century that also happen to be at the end of a whole millennium, are bound to stir a strange excitement in even the most placid person. The two most expected feelings that hold their sway can perhaps be summarized as: introspection and expectation — drawing a balance sheet of the past as also trying to gauge what the future holds. Such an exercise can cover not only a single person or his immediate concerns; it may as well cover his locality, his state or nation and may be stretched to entire humanity. The constraints of my acquaintance and knowledge hardly qualify me to scan any group higher or bigger than my own people: the Bengalis. Even in this, my limitations now plague me more than my enthusiasm to try out such a review — but these notwithstanding; the sheer thrill of initiating an animated *dadda* on the subject overpowers me. At the beginning, let me make it clear that I do not have the audacity to try to cover a thousand years in just a few pages: hence I will concentrate only on certain *significant* periods or issues, for the sake of presenting a viewpoint.

So let us begin: are the Bengalis a thousand years old? Or even more? Historians tell us about our history during the Pala-Sena period, which would give us about 1250 years to be proud of, but if we include the great Sasanka, we could be shareholders in a great concern that goes back fourteen centuries. But why stop there? Why not Vijay Singha and his conquest of Singhala, whenever it took place? After all, our school-teachers never tired of telling us about him? And if we study our archaeology a trifle carefully, we could always say that the chalcolithic users of Birbhaanpur and PandurajarDhibi were surely Bengalis. If we count the Palaeolithic inhabitants of Susunia and the numerous excavations of Bengal's lateritic western uplands as 'ours', it would give us a splendid history of five to six millennia if, of course,

we could just overlook the large gaps of unknown centuries in the intervening periods. Linguists and etymologists have pointed out that important Bengali words like *langala*, *narikel*, *taambula* (betel vine) and *haridraa* (turmeric), have Austric origins and hence we could claim direct ancestry from them. Maybe not, as the Austrics were too dark. Besides, have we not heard, ever since birth, that we are Aryans — even though most of us (please read the matrimonial columns) are just *shyam-varna*, a shade darker. Kabiguru took a swipe at this mindset when he wrote:

”*MakhhaMullarbolechheAarjjyo,*  
*Tai shunemorachherechhiKarjyo*”

(We've stopped toiling, like 'natives'/ Now that Max Mueller has said/ That we're all Aryans pure.)

To get back to seriousness, a good reply to the original question would perhaps depend on another question: what do you mean by Bengali? Let us not get into complications about 'Bengal' not existing as a unified geo-political entity till just a few centuries ago and let us presume that all the different names for the distinct parts of this ancient province — Pundrabardhan, Varendra, Rarh, Sumha, Vanga, Samatata, Harikela, etc., are deemed to be the 'Bengal' that we are discussing. Even so, we would require some acceptable criteria for determining the antiquity of the Bengalis. If our stress is on the Bengalis as a linguistic and cultural group, not just on the facts of geography or the needs of politics, then we have to exclude Sasanka or the Pala-Senarajas at least because they neither wrote in Bengali nor did they patronize or develop it. We do not know if they ever spoke in proto-Bengali. My submission is that the Bengali language, as we recognize it, developed from its infancy in the Pala-Sena period not because of the rulers but in spite of them. The common man, at least in the western *rarh* region, was perhaps conversing in a language that had a Bengali bias — as the *Charyapads* would reveal — but it was so full of other words that we cannot honestly call it Bengali. Though it is traditional to claim that the *Charyapads* are the beginning of Bengali literature — as they bestow upon us an antiquity of about nine hundred or a thousand years — we must not forget that they had remained

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unknown to us till their momentous discovery in Nepal only a century ago. They can hardly be appropriated as Bengali, in spite of the distinct Bengali character in grammar, idiom and syntax. The *Charyapads* belong to the emerging new Indo-Aryan speeches, common to all the east-Indian languages — when Bengali had not yet blossomed out of *Laukik-Avahatta*, the proto-vernacular stage of *Apabhrangsa*. It is, therefore, safer to tread on firmer ground by concentrating on the earliest extant specimens of manuscripts and concrete historical evidence, when trying to fix the age of the Bengali people.

Here, certain essential demarcations need to be made between terms like 'Bengal', the 'Bengali' script, the 'Bengali' language and the 'Bengali' people. Each of these has evolved over the centuries, sometimes separately and sometimes in unison, until all these identities appear to have coalesced into an integrated entity, sometime in the fourteenth century. Then, why talk about a thousand years? Because, as mentioned, the Bengalis as a distinct people, inhabiting a specific geographical area, communicating in the Bengali language and writing in the Bengali script did not appear on the scene all of a sudden — but took several centuries to develop. Other aspects of culture like dress, mannerisms, idioms, habits and diet also took centuries to reach the present stage — and are still changing with every generation — but clinging on to a common 'core', which is distinctively Bengali.

The script, for instance, took almost fifteen centuries to firm up — from the Brahmi of Asokan inscriptions (third century BC), via the Dhanaidaha copper-plate inscription of Kumaragupta (432 AD), through the Khalimpur (late eighth century) and the Bangarh (late tenth century) grants of the Palas to reach what Dr. Sukumar Sen calls "the fully articulated Bengali alphabet" found in the *Tarpandighi* grant of Lakshmansen and in the late-twelfth or early-thirteenth century Cambridge Manuscripts of *Yogaratnamala* and *Pancharakshaa*. But all scholars are not willing to give such an old date. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji felt that this "full articulation" of the alphabets took place only by the fifteenth century, not before. Dr. R.D. Banerji, also states that "the final development of certain letters, such as *i*, *ca* and *na* are not noticeable until after the

Muhammedan conquest." Historians have often taken a route different from that of the pundits of Bengali literature, by tracing the gradual evolution of language and script through the humble clay-tablets that the plebeians inscribed as vows (*mannats*) to god, if their simple desires were fulfilled. Professor BratindraNathMukhopadhyay has brought out such a study of 'donative inscriptions' in *Pratnasamiksha*, depicting the common Bengali's quest in the first four centuries of the previous millennium to express himself: very significant, as it is the common man who contributed most to development of a distinct Bengali civilization.

Scholars are vehement in their denunciation of "the shock of this conquest" as a "blow (which) stunted literature, prevented its growth" — until the Neo-Vaishnavism of Chaitanya came to the rescue. While the valuable contributions of the sixteenth century GaudiyaVaishnava chroniclers, Govinda Das, Brindaban Das, Jayananda, KrisnadasKaviraj and Lochan Das were indeed landmarks in Bengali literature (although individual excellence differed from *kavi* to *kavi*), would it really be fair to ignore all the preceding pathfinders? Among the latter, we have to start from the 1470s: MaladharBasu's *Srikrishnavijay* and the Bengali *Bhaagavat*. Krittivas's *Ramayan* may have been written a few years later though some claim it may have been even earlier. KabindraParameswar's translation of a part of the *Mahabharat* may be placed around the turn of the sixteenth century. Though hundreds of scholars have fought it out, to place the *SrikrishnaKirtan* of Chandidas (*Boru* or *Dwija*) in every possible year of this period, we may go by the consensus that while the narration may belong to an earlier phase, the language possibly belongs to early sixteenth century. Does this indicate that Bengali literature is only a little more than five centuries old? Until we come across manuscripts in the Bengali script, expressing a language that can be termed as Bengali, belonging to a phase earlier than this, we have no way of proving that Bengali literature is very much older than the late-fifteenth century. The spoken word in every language precedes its literary form by one or more centuries, and therefore, one can safely place the construction of the Bengali identity, in really palpable terms, to the post-*Charyapad*, post-Sena period, possibly in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

But are not the first three centuries after Islam entered Bengal in 1202-04 the 'dark centuries' as scholars have repeatedly told us? While it is true that we have no clear picture of the social and economic history of these three centuries, the political events are quite well documented — in fact better than ever before in Bengal's history. Then why is this period termed 'dark'? Because no literature is found; no royal patronage of cultural activities is evident; no temples were built; inscriptions and land grants are rare, and so on. In one sentence: because the Islamic *Yavans* coming from outside withdrew state patronage of Brahmanism — which was so profuse during the preceding Sena-*yug*. Just a moment: were the Senas themselves not from Karnataka? Did not the 'pure' Brahmans of Bengal take immense pride in their non-Bengali ancestry and speak and write in Sanskrit — with contempt for the language of the masses of Bengal till the last century? Is it really sensible to expect the Turki-Pathans to patronize a religion they sincerely felt was 'heretical' and endow its elite with favours? What do the 'dark age' theorists have to say when the Sena 'outsiders' destroyed the local heritage, the prevailing Buddhist religion and the egalitarian culture of 350 years of Pala Bengal and imposed an up-country 'Sanskritism' over the people? And what is more interesting is that the three centuries are actually two — at our present stage of knowledge. Even this period may be reduced further if more evidence can be gathered, painstakingly, on the culture of Bengal in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. After all, Buhler, Haraprasad Shastri, Dinesh Sen and others discovered all the critical evidence on which we base our history of Bengali language and culture only in the last hundred years or so. The task is difficult, as the area has already been scoured intensively and manuscripts written on dried leaves (*bhurjya-patra, taal, tertet*), or even the later *tulatgaz*, do not survive the ravages of Bengal's hot humidity for too long — but chance discoveries are still possible and they have often changed the course of history in the past. Re-assessment of existing evidence, with an open mind, would, perhaps, situate texts like the SunyaPuranin the thirteenth century, after discounting the obvious later interpolations. The manuscripts randomly collected by the late Maniklal Singha, which he cites in his *RarherMantrayan*, could also be examined carefully.

Let us first reduce this 'dark period'. While Bengali expression in literature has not yet been traced before the 1470s, there is other evidence of cultural interest. The relations between the Pathan-Turki ruling classes and the upper caste of the Hindu Bengalis, especially in the Gaur-Varendri region where Islam secured its first firm footing, is something of a mystery even now and more empirical research is required to either substantiate or rebut the stories of a cosy cohabitation that one picks up from social tales. In 1397, we find the Firdausi Sufi, Maulana Muzaffar Shams Balkhi complaining to the Sultan that "vanquished unbelievers exercise their power and authority to administer the lands which belong to them" and that "they have also been appointed executive officers over Muslims in the lands of Islam". Richard Eaton states that this late-fourteenth century development would lead to increasing tensions between the two gentries in the early years of the fifteenth century, culminating finally in the *coup d'état* by Raja Ganesh (Kans) and his son's enthronement on the *masnad* of Bengal as Jadu-Jalaluddin. What is of relevance to us is that though Jalaluddin strenuously asserted his credentials as a correct Muslim, Ma Huan, the Chinese visitor noticed that the universal language was Bengali, though some courtiers understood Persian. Jalal's coins bore the un-Islamic symbol of the lion, the *vahan* of *Chandi-Durga*, while his Eklakhi mausoleum at Pandua adopted motifs, terracotta decor and structural traits, which are more Bengali than Islamic — establishing itself as the prototype of Bengali Islamic architecture. Thus, we see that from the early years of the fifteenth century, all was not 'dark' and the Bengali identity had started asserting itself quite prominently. Even after the Ilyas-shahi restoration, this trend did not disappear and Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (1459-74), in fact, actively patronized Yashoraj and Maladhar Basu, whom he titled as 'Gunaraj Khan'. As the contributions of Sultans Alauddin Husain Shah and Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah, who ruled between 1493 and 1532 — during the exciting period of Chaitanya — have already been so widely acknowledged, I will not repeat them.

At this point, since we have reached a stage which is quite familiar, we may as well ponder on what constitutes an identity,

other than a common language, a distinct script, grammar and a literature. Israelis have proved that a fixed geographical area is not always essential: to them a common religion was enough. To us a common language proved to be the pivot of our culture though none can deny that religion did lead to variations within a broad and reasonably common culture. But what matters most for an identity is its acceptance: the vexing problem of who is a Bengali and who is not is easily solved if we adopt the 'acceptance' criteria. He who accepts and claims, often with pride, that he is a Bengali, whatever his origins, is the real Bengali. Let us go through a few examples. Among the Jains and Rajasthanis who settled in the Jiaganj-Azimgang locality of Murshidabad during Man Singha's time, the Srimals later accepted that they were Bengalis, but most of the rest, the Dudhorias, Bachhawats, Singhis, Nahars, Dugars and Nawalakhas did not, though almost all of them spoke excellent Bengali. Hence, the latter are not strictly Bengalis. The Tamil Iyengars of Purulia have a similar story: while some of them, like Basudeb Acharya the Parliamentarian, are indistinguishable from other Bengalis, there are others who retain their old culture and look for pure Iyengar brides and grooms elsewhere. In Bardhaman, while scions of the Punjabi Raj-family never fully identified themselves as Bengalis and married outside the state (though the family did a lot for the state) some of their fellow-Khatris who spoke Bengali have, in the last few decades, almost totally assimilated with Bengalis even in wedlock. The Aggarwals of old Malda are so Bengali that they are hardly admitted as Marwaris anymore. We can give many such examples and Debashis Bose of *Kaushiki* has collected a mountain of data on such subjects. So many Pandes, Trivedis, Jhas/Ojhas, Mishirs/Mishras, Sukuls/Shuklas, Rajput Singhas and other obvious 'outsiders' have done credit to Bengal and its literature that we are proud to call them Bengalis. As all identities are essentially 'social constructs', individual belief, behaviour and role-play are their essential ingredients.

On the reverse side, we have to mention three groups that vehemently opposed 'Bengalisation' of culture in this province. They are the Sanskritist-*Brahmans*, the Muslim *Ashraafs* and the die-hard Anglophiles. Their problem was again that of identity: many of them genuinely felt that they belonged to 'superior' cultures and took

pains to stay apart from the culture of the 'natives'. When I use the term *Brahman*, I must clarify that it includes the other two so-called upper castes of Bengal, many of who either manufactured or emphasized their up-country ancestry and consequently stayed away from the mainstream. Not all *Brahmans* opposed Bengali and the rural ones were in fact at the forefront of Bengali literature, right from its inception. Even when accepting Bengali, rather reluctantly, Sankritists often tried their best to pack unnecessary and complicated Sanskrit words into the language, very much like the so-called *Ashraaf* and Anglophiles who tried to stuff redundant Urdu-Persian and English terms. Bengali's association with all these languages has definitely enriched it, but what we are not willing to accept is a mind-set or a lifestyle based on cultural superiority. I have never been able to understand as to why we should accept the Sanskritised versions of the names of our rivers, like *Kangsavati*, *Silavati*, *Labanyavati* and *Suvarnavati* on the ground that these are the 'civilized' names which were corrupted by us — to the popular names of *Kansai*, *Silai*, *Nowai* and *Sonai*. I have often asked linguists to tell me how the suffix 'vati' becomes 'aai', because logically it should become 'voi' or 'boi' and then 'oi' — not 'aai'. Such deliberate and pompous Sanskritic distortion of words is an offence comparable to the peculiar Anglicization of local place-names, like Midnapore and Burdwan.

Let us leave language and literature and try to locate traces of Bengali-ness in other spheres as well. The traditional dress has changed little except that the *aardirgile-karapanjabi* and the *pyjama* have a Muslim stamp on them. In any case, even with unavoidable westernization of our dress, the average Bengali can quickly change from his work-clothes to the traditional attire on any social occasion — and unlike many other Indians, he takes pride in his *dhuti-panjabi*. We will discuss food later and so let us focus on, say, architecture. The distinctly Bengali style that was imprinted on Islamic religious structures has already been touched upon. The Lattan mosque at Gaur built in the first decade of the sixteenth century is another example of typical Bengali Islamic architecture, which was replicated in numerous buildings. It is a pity that no real comprehensive study of the location of such structures all over Bengal has been made — as has been done for Hindu temples.



PerweenHasan feels that the Bengali Buddhist temple tradition contributed directly to the revival of the square, Bengali brick mosques in the fifteenth century, while A. H. Dani traces the inspiration for its gently-curved cornice to the thatched bamboo hut, so common, even today: "The thatched hut motif became an essential ingredient of Bengali architecture, whether public or private, Hindu or Muslim". The 'bungalow', derived from the word 'Bangla' would be the province's lasting contribution to British colonial architecture. The invaluable analytical work that David McCutchion and HitesranjanSanyal had started on Bengali Hindu temples remained incomplete, as both met with untimely deaths. Some interesting observations made by Hitesbabu will be discussed later.

It is now becoming clearer that the Bengali cultural personality had first started demonstrating itself from the fourteenth century and had made itself quite clear by the sixteenth century — irrespective of whether it was Hindu or Muslim. But what about the Buddhists? In Bengal it is commonly believed that the Islamic 'destruction' of monasteries and monks, the Sena-sponsored Brahmanical revivalism and Buddhism's own 'degeneration' led to its demise. If so how did the Vaishnavas bring so many Buddhistic sects like the *Sahajiyas* and *Nera-neris* under their spell in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Erudite theories exist of how large-scale transfer of loyalties by the *neres* (i.e., shaven-headed Buddhists) to Islam prompted the upper-caste Hindus to brand all Bengali Muslims as *neres*. HaraprasadShastri stirred a hornet's nest when he declared in 1896 that Dharma worship in Bengal was, in fact, 'living Buddhism'. Scholar after scholar attacked his thesis — at times, on grounds that were more passionate than factual. The contribution of at least half a millennium of Buddhism can hardly be minimized, even if Hinduism and Islam later appropriated many of its sacred sites and deities. The Buddhist deity, *Avalokiteswar*, became *LokeswarShiva* while *Tara* and *Basuli* turned into Hindu goddesses. Numerous Buddhist and even Jain idols are still worshipped in our temples under different names — often after covering the deity's tell-tale iconographic details with clothing or with *sindoor*. Place names in Bengal like Panchthupi (Pancha-stupika), Bajaasan (Bajraasan) and Dhamarai (Dharmarajika) reveal

some traces of Bengal's Buddhist period. The many severed heads of the Buddha found all over and common Bengali words like *stupaakaar* and *dhangsastup* (destroyed *stupa*) convey that the Buddhist period was ended with at least some amount of force. The more important point here is that a direct result of centuries of Buddhism is the lasting tradition of egalitarianism in Bengal that its people cherish even today.

Whether we take Haraprasad-babu seriously or not, the fact remains that most of the important folk cults of Bengal, like those of *Dharma*, *Manasa* and *Nath* have links in a common cosmogony, centering on a primordial lord, Dharma. This god is portrayed as being obviously superior to the three he created Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva — revealing a strong anti-Sanskritic bias, quite akin to the Buddhist tales of superiority over Brahman religion. Scholars like Sukumar Sen state that these folk cults thrived in the 'dark' centuries following the Islamic conquest, though their ballads, the *MangalKavyas*, would take some more time to appear in writing. Some texts like Vidyapati's *Gorakshavijay*, dated as early as 1403, and Bipradas's *Manasavijay* of 1495 predate the GaudiyaVaishnava literature. But the bulk of the extant *MangalKavya* manuscripts were written in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Chaitanya and the Vaishnavas so bedazzled the Bengali with revolutionary ideas and superb literary craftsmanship that, comparatively, much less importance has been accorded to the *MangalKavyas* - even after their appropriation by the upper caste chroniclers. Except the *ManasaMangal* poets, whose locations were spread all over Bengal, it is remarkable that almost all the other *MangalKavya* writers were mainly from the western *Rarh* region. All the stories and their events that captivated rustic audiences throughout the night for centuries as *jagarans*, also centre on places in the *Rarh* area, along with the Ganga of course. The other remarkable feature that I decipher is that three direct messages were conveyed through these entertaining folk ballads. The first among which was "worship the folk deity and prosper, or ignore and suffer". The second message was that these gods and goddesses of the hitherto-untouchable *antyajas* and *vratyas* (marginal) were now part of the Hindu pantheon, and the third was that Brahmans could now worship them legitimately since their relationship with Hindu gods

had been invented/ constructed with so much effort. The process of 'adjustment' that the imported flag-bearers of proud Sanskrit culture had begun in Bengal in the twelfth century with the *Brahmavaivarta* and *BrihaddharmaPuranas* now culminated in their 'pariah-nization' as BenoySarkar was so fond of terming it. The immediate benefit insofar as Hindus were concerned lay in the fact that this development effectively attracted the lowest strata and stemmed the tide of conversion to Islam in western Bengal. The other regions of Bengal also had their folk ballads, like *MaynamatirGaan*, *GopichanderGaan* and the *MymensinghaGeetika*, but nowhere was the religious message as forthright as in the *MangalKavyas*. It now makes sense as to why the masses of only western Bengal (*Rarh*) voted for the new, eclectic brand of Hinduism — why only the districts of Bardhaman Division (and 24Parganas) had a Hindu-majority population in 1872, while all the districts of Bengal east of the Bhagirathi river showed the opposite.

The *MangalKavyas* often give us hints of a hunting-gathering or pastoral stage, in episodes like Kalketu's early life or in the story of *Manasa* and the cowherds. The decisive conversion of agriculture or the 'peasant-ization' of such an economy is also spelt out. But historians find the several layers of possibly-factual descriptions, entrapped as they are in the quick sands of poetic fantasies, quite unreliable to work with - Dr.TapanRaychaudhuri's initial brave attempt notwithstanding. Richard Eaton has established a nexus between the development and spread of the new peasantry in eastern Bengal and the rise of Islam. Insofar as the west and south-west were concerned, my research leads me to believe that just the opposite happened as the new accommodative or inclusive strategies of Vaishnavism, *MangalKavyas* and what I term as '*Shivayanisation*'/peasantization worked in tandem.

Before I touch upon the last-mentioned concept, a few words on the scenario of this region may be helpful. There is some evidence to believe that large areas of the lateritic drylands, forested *saal-bhumi*, as well as riverine marshlands of the *Rarh* were being increasingly brought under the plough from the early and middle parts of the medieval period. That the process was not complete by the late-18<sup>th</sup> century prompted British to denote the

region as the *JangalMahals*. This 'peasant-isation' may have been triggered by the increasing population of the 'fringe dwellers' or by the contraction of the economy, consequent upon total loss of coastal and maritime trading benefits in the sixteenth/seventeenth century. The fact remains that huge bands of autochthones were settling down in these parts, often with the blessings of the rajas of Orissa. Their chieftains were soon admitted as Rajputs and similar legends circulated about how their fathers were actually from Rajputana. Brahmanical ingenuity contrived stories of how these 'Rajput fathers' had to leave their pregnant wives behind in the jungles of the *Rarhas* they travelled on their way to Jagannath-Puri for their pilgrimages. Thus the autochthones rulers were actually Rajputs! Aphorisms on agricultural practices, like those contained in *KhanarBachan* and *Shivayan* were immensely popular. The lovable Bengali peasant, *Bom-Bhola*, has to be understood in this context of the 'peasantising' of the mighty *Shiva* of Kailash! The 'humanising' of the warrior-goddess, the *SimhavahiniMahisamardiniChandi-Durga*, into the beloved daughter-goddess of Bengal falls in the same genre, which I have tried to call *Shivayanisation*. The egalitarian masses of Bengal would more readily accept a citizen-deity than a ruler-idol, even today.

Now that we have covered many facets of the Bengali character in the light of history, let us return briefly to politics. The last Afghan to rule Bengal surrendered to Akbar in 1575. The story of how the 'valiant *BaroBhuiyas*' fought for the motherland has been debunked by Sir JadunathSarkar as "a false provincial patriotism", who further adds, "The height of absurdity is reached when our dramatists call Pratapaditya as the counterpart of MaharanaPratap". Whether it were these 'upstarts' or the Afghan rebels or even Portuguese renegades who troubled Akbar the most may still be open for debate, but what is not is the lasting impression that Mughal rule in Bengal left. For example, Persianization of Bengali reached its height and Muslim society was enriched by Shia-Persian immigrants. Bengal had never been subjected to such a pan-Indian central authority — except for fleeting periods. We may remember that the Guptas lost their hold over their north-Indian empire and that too, a millennium ago. The real subjugation of Bengal began not before Islam Khan established

Mughal supremacy in Jahangir's reign, in 1612-13. Other important landmarks in Bengal worth noting are 1632, when Shah Jehan crushed the Portuguese menace and 1666, when Shaista Khan extended the empire upto Chittagong in the extreme south east. Both these events encouraged the English and the Dutch to increase their presence in Bengal. The wars in Europe required saltpetre for the manufacture of gunpowder and the pre-Lancashire British economy eagerly consumed and traded in Indian cotton goods. Fine silks of this land were always welcome and other imports like indigo would also play important roles. Bengal fitted the bill for such trade, both because of cheap goods and political stability. The European companies imported huge amounts of silver, which led to the rapid monetisation of the economy and to enviable prosperity. While the Sultans had to be content with revenues in kind or in *cowries* (shells), with some *tankas* at times, the later Mughals, and their governors, had the dubious distinction of draining out Bengal's wealth in cartloads and caravans. In fact, MurshidQuli would literally purchase his different postings by pumping funds to a cash-strapped Aurangzeb which culminated in his elevation to the *Nawabi* of Bengal, ten years after his master's death. The revenue yield of the province would also prove to be a temptation to the English. But before we come to this stage, a question that often arises: why is it that the Bengalis themselves never made it big in trade and commerce?

To reply to this question, we have to go back by a few centuries. The *MangalKavyas* frequently refer to the exploits of the *saudagars* (Chand, Dhanapati, Srimanta) and their trading exploits. Obviously, there were traditions of sea-faring and trading deeply rooted in folk memory. The point is, when did these events take place? Though the Portuguese TomPires reports 'Bengali traders' in Malacca in 1515, we are not sure whether they were Hindus or Muslims, or even Gujaratis, who were using Bengal as a base, as the latter is a phenomenon that continued well into the 18th century. Manrique reported, a little more than a century later, that 'such trading was over for the Bengalis -thanks to the Portuguese devils'. Yet two late-eighteenth century accounts, *Hari-lila* and *Chandrakanta* mention the overland sub-continental trade of Jaynarayan and the sea-trade of Chandrakanta. The *Chaitanya-*

*Charitamrita* refers to *millionaire* traders of Saptagram and Frederick's reports corroborate the port's prosperity. If we go back even further, we will see that one of the pillars on which Buddhism rested in Bengal was the Banik community who were selected by the orthodox Brahmin Sena rulers for social down-gradation in the twelfth century. Since then, commerce has been ingrained in the Bengali mind as a somewhat 'low' vocation. Yet, as our evidence relates, trade did occupy an important role — though the picture is still not clear. The Mughals imported Marwaris and Khatris into Bengal, providing them security in lieu of loans for campaigns and other purposes. When the Europeans gained prominence, they utilized 'up-country' traders like Ominchand, especially in Murshidabad. But they also took wealthy Bengali Baniks, like the Seths, Basaks and Seals as partners and on-account procuring agents their '*dadni* merchants'. But the East India Company suddenly put an almost abrupt end to this *dadni* system around the middle of the eighteenth century and instead appointed their own *gomostahs*, who were paid employees of the Company. Researches reveal that most of these employees were Bengali Brahmans, Vaidyas and Kayasthas — whose age of prosperity had thus just begun. Over the next few momentous decades, which passes through Plassey, Dewani, the Regulating Act of 1774 and the 'Permanent Settlement of 1793', these three castes would find increasing favour with the British while the Baniks would, by and large (exceptions notwithstanding) be marginalized in society and even in trade. This *trijati* brotherhood (later to be classified as the *bhadralok*) continues to dominate Bengal even today, in politics, government, academics and culture just look carefully at the surnames and titles of leaders in every possible sphere.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their events are too well known to bear repetition, except to point to certain developments that shaped the Bengali identity. Whether *Zemindari* enriched the Bengali or the extortionist nature of the foreign master's insatiable revenue demands impoverished the landholders is still open to furious debate and from Ramsbotham, Baden-Powell and Firminger to Somen Nandi, RajatKanta Ray, RatnalekhaChatterji and C.R. Panda, the debate continues. Two facts are beyond doubt: that even if some older families did perish,

others accrued conspicuous wealth, and that some of them became even richer in trade. But this time it was the *Pirali* Brahman's turn to make money in trade, more than the Banik, whether of the Suvarna or Gandha or Tantu variety. The *babu* of Calcutta was coming of age - he was bored and needed outlets to display his fortune - when the arrival of the raj-family from Oudh/*Awadh* came as an answer to his prayers. Bengali cuisine had always charmed its devotees, as no medieval poem is complete without mentioning all the sixty-six dishes. With increasing Sanskritisation, venison, game birds and pork that find mention in the tenth century *Naishadhacharitra* and Fullara's *Baromashi* of the sixteenth-seventeenth century disappeared from the *bhadralok's* menu and chicken became sacrilege to the Hindus, which continued till even a generation ago. Two whole *Puranas* had to be written in Bengali to justify the Brahman's fish-eating, but Chaitanya's vegetarianism introduced new vistas in Bengali cooking. *Daal*, for instance, became an essential item for the new Bengali *Vaishnava*, mainly as a protein-substitute for meat and fish. The carnivorous *babu* discovered that the Muslim *baburchi-khansama's* spicy *khaasi* was better than his onion/garlic-less *panthharjire-jhol* — which he retained only for sacred *bhogs*. *Pulao*, *Biriyani*, *Korma*, *Parothha*, etc., entered Bengali cuisine with the Sultans and Mughals, but only the Muslims could enjoy them until the very last stages of Islamic rule. The Portuguese *firingis* imported potatoes from Peru and Mexico in the sixteenth century, as also hot green chilies and *chaal-kumro*. The typically Bengali cuisine, as Chitrita Banerjee and Radhaprasad Gupta reveal, combines items like the Armenian *dorma* and *tarkari* (a Persian word) with vegetables like cabbages, cauliflowers, peas and tomatoes that were brought in by the English. The latter also introduced chops, cutlets, fries, omelettes (the Bengali *mamlets*). Funny distortions also took place the English 'cutlet with egg-coverage' became the Bengal's *skaviraji* cutlets! As for sweets, the Bengali's sweet tooth made him shatter the injunction of 'cow belt' of north India on 'cutting' of Krishna's milk with lemon, to produce *chhana* or *chena* (cottage cheese), inspired, perhaps by the Portuguese and the Dutch. A whole world of 'Bengali sweets' (*misthis*) were created from *chhana*, which as everyone admits, pushed into mediocrity the *kheer/khoya*-based sweets of the rest of India. But here again, most of the better-known Bengali

sweets were conjured only in the last one and a half centuries. Bhim Nag perfected the *sandesh* and Nabinchandra Das the *rassogolla* in Bagh-Bazar in the 1860s, while Lady Canning inspired the *ledykinni* and K.C.Das introduced the *rossomalai* a generation later. ‘*DhanyoBagh-Bazar*’, really!

The entertainment-apparatus of the *Lucknowis* that was to follow Wajed Ali Shah to Calcutta could find no better clientele than among the *nouveau richebabus*. Though the process had begun earlier (we hear of *baijis* in connection with a great Bengali in the 1820s), this post-Mutiny development is reported to have contributed greatly to satisfaction of epicurean urges of the Bengali-*babu*, contemporary satire notwithstanding. Lest history judge the culture of nineteenth century Bengal only in terms of the *zemindar* and the *babu* (flying kites and quarrelling with pigeons), Sumanta Banerji and other scholars have focused on the culture of the masses. Saucy satirical performances were enacted through *Shongs* and *kobir-larai* while provocative *jatras* and *jagaran-panchalis* lampooned the *zemindar/babu* culture. *Khemtas* and *jhumur* dances regaled the common man, while *Bat-tala* woodcut paintings, colourful chromo-lithographs, oleographs, Chorebagan prints and Kalighat *pat*-sketches enlivened his existence. It is, however, a fact that until contemporary Europeans, like Hana Knizkova and the Archers (William and Mildred), ‘re-discovered’ the humble Kalighat *pats*, we had overlooked or ignored the artistic value of these cheap folk art.

The nineteenth century will be remembered by all Bengalis for the leaps and bounds with which they went ahead over the rest of India. And the roots lay in the head-start that Bengal made in English education, thanks to the setting up of schools, colleges and the University of Calcutta. But it was not as if there were no hiccups in the process. The ‘Young Bengal’ movement of the Derozians and the conversions of *Kulins* like Krishamohun Banerji to Christianity sent shock waves throughout Bengali society, as much as, if not more than the Bentinck-Ram Mohun reforms. The Hindus were alarmed about the high social cost that one had to pay for the economic benefits of western education and the Muslims generally decided to ignore the offer — much to their peril, as history would



demonstrate. The transfer of authority to *Maharani* Victoria, the setting up of the BrahmoSamaj and the efforts of Vidyasagar, Ramkrishna and Vivekananda, and of course the Bengali renaissance, are among the major events of this period. Equally noteworthy is the remarkable degree of *kerani-sation* of the ever-increasing petit bourgeoisie — the passionate urge to join the expanding army of clerks in government and trading houses: a trend that continued unabated till the 1990s. ‘The past glory of India’ is a recurring theme that germinated around the end of the century, while both nationalism and religious resurgence started holding out an intoxicating appeal to the Bengali Hindu — sometimes in unison. Bengali self-expression was reaching dizzy heights, in the writings of Bankimchandra and MichaelMadhusudanDutt, while the Bengali stage mesmerized all. Rabindranath and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay would then stride in, introducing refreshing styles in Bengali literature— which reached its peak at this juncture. The early decades of the twentieth century also taught the Bengali the tactics of confrontation with the overwhelming might of the British Empire. The partition of Bengal (*Banga-bhanga*) proved to be both the cause and the effect of heightening this confrontation and it soon became clear that Britain's honeymoon with Bengal was coming to an end. Events were fast leading to their logical conclusion: the separation of Orissa and Assam from Bengal and the transfer of the capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911. Though hurt, Bengalis could hardly be expected to grasp the full implications of this spatial shift at that time, as Calcutta and Bengal continued to lead India, for some more time.

*Banchana* (deprivation) as a paradigm or *anidée fixe* was now getting firmly entrenched in the mind-set of Bengal. The Bengal identity soon expressed itself as a type of cultural nationalism: in the first four decades of the twentieth century. In the visual arts, Nandalal and the other two Tagores (Abanindranath and Gaganendranath) and their ‘Bengal School of Art’ streaked past the colonial varieties, such as the ‘Company artists’ and their successors. But not without challenge — Jamini Roy found solace in folk forms, while HemenMajumdar, JaminiGangopadhyay and BinodbihariMukhopadhyay carved out separate niches for

themselves. The massive sculptures of Ramkinkar Baij overawed the Bengali, while Uday Shankar burst on the dance scene with his 'neo-Indian' style inspired by Ananda Coomaraswami. *Rabindra Sangeet* continued to captivate and fill a critical cultural gap, but no classical dance form could be traced in Bengal, Mahua Mukherjee's contemporary attempts at Gaudiya Nritya notwithstanding. Rabindranath came to the rescue once again and created a dance form that blended the slow rhythmic movements of Java and Bali with Indian *mudras*. It was not only in literature and in the arts that the Bengali 'cultural nationalism' found its expression and creating genius. Football, which had charmed even Vivekananda, now thrilled the masses — especially when barefooted Mohun Bagan players beat the 'whites' at their own game. Bengal was delirious with joy! Chitranjan Das, Deshapriya Jatindra Mohan and Netaji Subhas dominated Congress politics at the national level — until Subhash's defeat at Tripuri re-confirmed the Bengali theme of *banchana*. Subhas Chandra Bose became an instant icon when his khaki-clad volunteers filled in another void that the Bengalis had: that of a romantic martial hero, charging on horseback.

The 1937 elections confirmed what the 1872 Census had indicated: that Bengal was primarily a Muslim state. The Hindu *zemindar* and the *bhadralok*, who had either disbelieved or ignored the Census reports, now faced the chills of reality. He had had his heyday of unchallenged monopoly in every sphere of life and had refused to accept his co-linguists ("We are Bengalis, they are Mussalmans"), but now had very little choice before him. The elite of East Bengal could migrate to Calcutta, but what about the common Hindu there, who found the new self-assertion of the Muslims quite disturbing. So while Fazlul Haque ranted and Suhrawardy played with communal fire, riots racked Bengal — so soon after the devastating famine of 1942. The bleak events and the subsequent bloodshed ripped apart, at least for that period, any illusions of a composite, united Bengali identity. Partition followed and the new age introduced a new and painful term: 'refugee'. Heart-breaking tales unfolded and untold suffering followed the *Bangal-Ghoti* rivalry became proverbial. But we may now admit that the enforced development of both Bengals was, perhaps, the only

benefit of 'Partition'. The schism in the Bengali identity centring around two religions, is yet to be bridged — even after the euphoric events of 1971, when the 'other Bengal' paid in blood for being Bengalis first and Muslims thereafter. Writers and intellectuals of Bangladesh, like ShamsurRahaman, ShamsulHaq, KabirChoudhury, Anisuzzaman, Sirajul Islam Choudhury and Akhtaruzzaman Elias have proved the prophets of Bengal wrong for the Bengali language and identity are as alive and vibrant in Bangladesh as much as they are here.

Before we complete our story about the Bengalis in the second millennium after Christ, one trend may be worth noting. The Naxalite outburst in the late '60s and early '70s changed the basic character of post-British Bengal in the political and social sense the lovely, longish nights gave way to desolate streets after 10 or 11 pm. For so many, "life was", during the heydays of left-wing extremism, very Hobbesian, i.e., "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Writers and filmmakers did not miss out the boiling frustration over unemployment and poverty. The contracting job opportunities for the products of *kerani*-producing educational institutions and futility of 'interviews' were highlighted in film classics like '*JanoAranye*', 'Interview' and '*Pratidwandi*', and lampooned in 'Chorus'. But what is the solution? The gun had failed, so? Live, by any means, live. The new generation first learnt to live — since the 'system' had failed, it could no longer dictate its values. Many took to small enterprises and supply-services — from 'fast food stands' and other 'hawking' to petty contractor's jobs and real estate 'agencies'. The more desperate tasted blood in the 'protection racket', and in forcible collections. Transport was another attractive sector and the agonized Bengali youth drove out others from some traditional sectors. The recklessness of this class was recognized by Samaresh Bose in his novel 'Bihar' and it becomes more evident in the loud, lunatic driving of mini buses through the crowded roads of Calcutta shattering the earlier placidity and old-world charm of leisurely, slow-moving, *tungtung* trams. Of course, this is not to say that every first-generation entrepreneur is a member of this class, which we may call the 'lumpen bourgeois'. The unscrupulousness of the 'lumpen' shocks the average Bengali, who still clings on to his cultural values, while

the 'get rich quick' mentality of a section of the bourgeois had always invited scorn. No more, perhaps, as consumerism sweeps the world over and there can be no 'islands' with TV satellites around. The increasing monetisation of services rendered has historically transformed relationships and the 'must win' generation of Bengalis does not believe in old loyalties and the values of a society that grew up in commands like "*Saat-ta baajeporteybosho*" (Sit down with your books, it is 7 p.m.). Poverty has been a perennial theme in Bengal recall Kazi Nazrul Islam's famous lines: "*Hey Daaridro, Tumi Morey Korechho Mahan*" (Oh Poverty! Thou hast conferred greatness on me). This perhaps inspired Amartya Sen to go for the 'Nobel', but it is now their arch enemy and 'plain living and high thinking' is totally out of their scheme. 'News' for them is not to be savoured leisurely over cups of tea — it is to be shuffled quickly, like a pack of colourful cards, frequently punctuated by heavy doses of jazzy commercial advertisements.

As the next century unfolds, a thought crosses my mind: will the coming decades be theirs or ours? The Bengali character, that evolved over so many centuries, through so many transformations, always clung to a common core of values — and survived. The self-made entrepreneur and the 'lumpen bourgeois' have successfully devastated the myth that Bengalis always need employers and protest too much. We need to learn to lose gracefully. I feel worried at times about the image of my people: The wanton violence at the cricket stadium at Eden Gardens has telecast the mischief of this group of vandals to the whole world, repeatedly, in the recent past. Will they, therefore, take over the 'franchise' of portraying their Bengali identity in the years to come? Perhaps not, for Y2K also belongs to Saurav Gangulis, Dibuyendu Baruas and to the countless Bengali school children who still read Feluda and Kakababu series with gusto.

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