

Bengali Culture Over A Thousand Years.

Translated from the original Bengali by Sarbari Sinha.

Gulam Murshid

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The book under review is an English translation of *Hazar Bochorer Bangla Sanskriti*, published from Dhaka in 2006, and which has been, by all accounts, a well-received and an extremely popular work. Its continuing popularity in part explains this translation; apparently, both the author and the translator decided that this entertaining and instructive work ought also to be made available to non-Bengali readers in a free and lucid translation. As a reviewer, I can only joyously uphold that decision.

The problem, however, with reviewing such books is that the translator's contribution is either somewhat understated or not judged at all, especially when there is no scope for comparing the original with the translated version. In such cases, a reviewer is never sure if a particular error of conception or articulation lay with the translator or the author. On the whole though, I would allow the translator the benefit of doubt for two related reasons. Assuming that a translator is not also an expert in the relevant field, factual errors are likely to go unnoticed. As far as conceptual problems go, the translator's job would have been met if only he or she was really to remain as faithful as possible to the original text, notwithstanding any suspected shortcomings.

Murshid's work comprises 14 chapters in all, covering a wide variety of subjects ranging from history, politics, social anthropology, the arts and architecture, women, music, sartorial manners and even food habits. Much of the material is derived from the author's previous works particularly on the development of Bengali language

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and literature and woman-related reforms. As can only be expected, Murshid is at his best when it comes to useful and insightful surveys of social, linguistic and literary developments in colonial Bengal. The work concludes with a chapter that claims to bring out the 'distinctiveness', somewhat simplistically I fear, of Bengali culture. I shall return to this question presently. As an overview of Bengal's history and culture between roughly the tenth and twentieth centuries, this book is breathtakingly comprehensive in its scope, copiously informative, engaging in its arguments and lucidly direct in its approach and articulation. This is a book that I would happily recommend to an informed and inquisitive college student and the interested general reader.

An underlying problem with this work, as I progressively discovered, was the ambivalence with regard to defining the concepts of 'Bengal' and 'Bengali' themselves. Now, if Bengal is taken to be a homogenized geo-cultural region one would have to say that such a formation exists no more. A once palpable linguistic and cultural unity has now been decisively overridden by the emergence of new political frontiers. W. Bengal and Bangladesh are now two distinct political entities, one a province within a federal formation and the other, a sovereign state in its own right. Each has its own political compulsions as the ongoing controversy over the National Registry in India clearly reveals. To me what also undermines this acclaimed unity is the term 'Bangladesh' itself, representing an appropriation of sorts, a category claiming to exclusively represent the Bengali habitat and 'authentic' Bengali culture. Here, it would be pertinent to recall that the term 'Bangladesh' was coined by President Zia ur Rehman, in lieu of 'Bengali' only so

that the Bengali-speaking population of W. Bengal may be excluded. Arguably, to call this territory East Bengal or else 'Purva Bangla' would have been more apt and innocent.

It is no less problematic to define Bengal or Bengali on the basis of a commonly spoken language. The problems here are manifold. First, I am not sure if the sheer multiplicity of dialects in the region allows for an undifferentiated 'Bengali' linguistic or cultural unity. Notwithstanding my roots in erstwhile east Bengal, I cannot understand a word of the Bengali spoken in Sylhet or Chittagong. In the Muslim dominated areas of W. Bengal, one way to distinguish the Bengali Muslim from the Hindu is still the former's preference for words like *pani* (for water), *phoophi* (aunt) or *apa* (older sister). Second, Bengali language spills over both geographical and political boundaries. There is an active Bengali diaspora now at work, both within the subcontinent and outside. I am given to understand that the Delhi-NCR region, with its significant Bengali presence, organizes Durga puja celebrations on a scale, visibly larger than any city or town in W. Bengal other than Kolkata. The *Probasi Bangali* (diasporic Bengali) has contributed no less to Bengali culture, of which the author himself is but a fine example. In the colonial period, the Western educated Bengali Babu was virtually the second colonizer and almost everywhere he went, there sprang up either a unit of the Brahma Samaj or else a Kali Bari (Kali temple). Third, throughout the work, the author treats Bengali culture as falling exclusively within the domain of two religious communities, the Hindus and the Muslims. On the other hand, if 'Bengal' and 'Bengali' were to be treated as more composite categories, it would have been only apt to also mention, however briefly, the several other communities that have made ethnic Bengal their home: Odiyas, Biharis, Armenians, Jews, Nepalis, Bhutias, Sikhs, Marwaris, Oswal Jains and the Chinese. Each of these communities, I imagine, has contributed towards a Bengali social and cultural world, tied as this is in a complex relationship with the politics, religion, trade or finance of the region. The Armenians, as I know, were once a significantly conspicuous community both in Dhaka and Kolkata and who in Kolkata had not heard of the fancy Chinese shoe-maker, the dentist and of the numerous, hugely popular kitchens offering Chinese cuisine? I hear there is even a Chinese Kali temple in central Kolkata which only speaks for the historical process of acculturation.

The author rightly complains of the relative neglect that Muslim contribution to Bengali culture has suffered in the hands of Hindu scholars and scribes (p.220). To an extent, surely, this was a legacy of Mill and Macaulay who instilled in the Hindu the fear and distrust of the 'tyrannical' Muslim. And, admittedly, there was also

the self-ascribed arrogance in Hindu literary icons who did not condescend to seriously consider the worth of his Muslim compatriot. On another level though, this appears to be largely a matter of preferences born in deep cultural familiarity. After all, who among Bengali Muslim scholars has undertaken serious studies on Hindu ritual or social institutions and customs? For a work that claims to be essentially a cultural history, Murshid's work on occasions deals excessively with the political (see in particular pp. 184-203). Also dubious are his sweeping generalizations as when he claims (p.243) that Bengali society was not very conducive for romantic love or that making a secret of romantic love was 'a typically Bengali trait' (p.245). In a culture deeply permeated by both Sanskrit erotic sensibility and the folk, this would be hard to defend, even for pre-modern times. However, the feature that worried me the most was the author's rather simplistic and far from nuanced treatment of history itself. For instance, in the context of changing Hindu-Muslim relations in colonial Bengal as manipulated by the British, it would have been only apt to point out how official policy towards Indian Muslims underwent three distinct phases: first, the phase ending with 1857 in which the British ruling class remained suspicious of the Muslim community but not unduly alarmed, the second, immediately following the uprising of 1857 when the Muslims were unjustly blamed for the uprising, forcing leaders like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to issue apologetic pamphlets and finally, the post-1885 phase when the burgeoning success of the Hindu dominated Congress forced a radical revision in the British policy towards the Hindu-Muslim question.

Murshid's work abounds in errors of historical fact and inattention to detail, some of these quite surprising. On page 272, we hear of a split in the Brahma Samaj in the year 1872 whereas the Samaj split twice, in 1866 and 1878 respectively. On page 362, we are given to understand that the first Bengali novel was *Alaler Ghore Dulal* by Tekchand Thakur (Peary Chand Mitra); on page 364, however, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay is shown to be the 'first' novelist. This is bound to be confusing for an average non-Bengali reader. On page 170, the author claims that since the coming to power of the Sena dynasty, Bengalis were ruled for about a thousand years by 'outsiders'. Now the Senas, as far as I know, were migrants from Karnataka and certainly distinct from the Abyssinian, Turkish, Pathan or Afgan rulers in Bengal who arrived from outside India. On page 92, in what constitutes a naïve generalization, Murshid compares the cultural message of the Vaishnava mystic, Chaitanya, to that of Martin Luther in Germany. Such a tendentious reading did indeed emerge in the days of Hindu nationalism; today it stands disavowed and disgraced. *Brahma Sangit*, such

as composed by Rammohun or his spiritual successors, was not in praise of (the Puranic deity) Brahma (p.159) but the metaphysical Absolute, Brahman. Also, contrary to the claims made by the author, Rammohun could not have attempted to establish a monotheistic religion based on the Vedas (p.155) since the Vedas themselves allowed reverence to multiple deities. In truth, Rammohun knew very little of the Vedic Samhitas and more often than not, by the 'Vedas', he meant the Upanishads. There is an equally misleading assertion made in respect of Vidyasagar (p.163) to the effect that this reformer modelled his widow marriage campaign on the lines anticipated by Rammohun himself. In truth, while Rammohun did set a precedent for hunting up scriptural sanctions, he never considered marriage to be an option for upper caste Hindu widows. His preference, clearly, was for a life of ascetic widowhood. In the 1850s, ironically enough, the Hindu orthodoxy often cited Rammohun's preference to denounce Vidyasagar's justification of widow marriages. Finally, to Murshid's point about how the Western educated Bengali progressively imbibed a secular worldview, I would offer the counter example of Bankimchandra who, when writing his *magnum opus*, the *Krishnarittra*, argued that it was his Western education that had made possible a belief in avatars! Arguably, there as very little that was truly secular within nineteenth century Indian culture and it would be no exaggeration

to say that given the pervasive and hegemonic effects of colonialism on the Indian mind, religious hermeneutics became an important tool of self-reflexivity and self-expression.

Specifically in the context of Indian Bengal with which I am far more familiar, I can think of three critical questions that may be said to constitute the said 'distinctiveness' of Bengali culture. First, together with the largely Bengali speaking state of Tripura, W. Bengal has had the experience of long years of Left Rule. There is a political sociology at work here which calls for an explanation. Second, why is it that caste friction or violence in ethnic Bengal has been relatively lower than that historically experienced in the states of the south or Maharashtra? Notably, there have never been Bengali equivalents of Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar. Third, why is it that in W. Bengal, there is at least a functional acknowledgement of male civility vis-a-vis the female? In cities like Delhi, men nonchalantly grab seats reserved for women in public transport and are prepared to assault anybody, young or old, male or female, whoever dared point to their unreasonableness and incivility. In Kolkata, as I have been noticing over the years, male passengers might wistfully eye an empty 'ladies seat' in an overcrowded bus and yet refrain from occupying it. Could we think of a cultural explanation for this?